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# Disney's family tree of femininity : an examination of the Disney heroines and their contributions to a broader understanding of femininity

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Disney's Family Tree of Femininity: An Examination of the Disney Heroines and Their  
Contributions to a Broader Understanding of Femininity.

By

Gwendolyn L. Hofmann

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Abstract: The Disney animated film canon offers society an expansive library from which to derive notions of femininity. Unfortunately, recent critics regularly stereotype the heroine as a passive individual limited by patriarchy. This thesis emphasizes that critics impose passivity on Disney heroines. Their approach narrows the scope of femininity by overemphasizing the heroine as a victim and detracting the focus from her choices and actions. This thesis is an exploration of each leading human female in Disney's full-length animated features asserting that they are active women who progress through time in levels of activity, wish fulfillment, and transformation. The analysis examines the Disney formula as defined by critics of the genre to contest that since the inception of the Walt Disney Feature Animation studio in 1934, not only does the heroine's level of activity progress through time, but each independent heroine uniquely presents her own subversive qualities. The leading roles of animated women from Snow White (1938) to Lilo & Stitch (2002) are tales of endurance, transformation, and imagination that actually privilege the feminine over the masculine. By investigating the two distinct eras of Disney's animated women from the helm of Walter E. Disney (1938-1959) to the later Team Disney women (1989-2002) this thesis explores the actions, desires, and relationships of the heroine to provide a greater portrayal of femininity than previously accepted. Finally, it encourages readers to open their mind to view the contested terrain of Disney animation through an empowered feminine perspective.

## CHAPTER I: DISNEY'S FAMILY OF FEMININITY

Lilo: "Ohana means family, family means nobody gets left behind...or forgotten."

Stitch: "This is my family. I found it, all on my own. It's little, and broken, but still good.

Yeah, still good." (Lilo & Stitch 2002)

The words of the most recent Disney heroine, Lilo, and her partner Stitch are a crucial reflection of Disney's heroines and how integral each unique member is to the larger representation of the Disney animated family. The notion of these films being a part of a greater "family" helps readers accept earlier Disney depictions of women for their empowering nature. Many critics grant that Disney's females are a reflection of their time of release. Thus, reading these films is similar to the way we understand our grandmothers for some of their old-fashioned ways yet we acknowledge them for their strength and perseverance as matriarchs. Rather than focusing on her "traditional" values, or her cooking and cleaning, we focus on how she survived The Great Depression and raised a family despite her husband's absence during several wars. Much like our consideration of the lived experiences of women in our families, "Through understanding the various representations of women in film, the layers of messages can be interpreted and used to help free women" (qtd. Layng 198). In order to help free women, we must first understand and appreciate them.

This paper argues that Disney provides a broad collection of femininity through the sum of its parts. In other words, the individual heroines each supply a portion of their femaleness to the canon of Disney women in order to provide an expanded understanding of what the term "female" encompasses. Each heroine provides society with an expansive collection of traits from which society is able to tailor their definition of



femininity for example, Snow White's resourcefulness, Alice's imagination, Ariel's drive for adventure, and Lilo's optimism. None of these representations is perfect for everybody, nor can any one encompass all of femininity but they are "still good" and should not "get left behind...or forgotten". Together this family of women is our own, and it enlarges the boundaries of femininity and the representation of females to society through Disney animated film.

The portrayal of females in Walt Disney's full-length animated feature films is a turbulent subject, evoking emotion across a varied collection of people. Judging by hefty sales figures and the prevalence of their many products, it is beyond doubt that Disney is a significant contributor to our American popular culture.<sup>1</sup> For that reason, it is important that we delve into the images that such a pervasive company releases to the public for a number of reasons. The analysis of Disney's women is important to parents who care about what their children watch, as well as for the curious child or teenager longing to identify with a character on the path of entertainment, escape, or excitement. The content of Disney's films is equally important to authors and educators who value cultural histories as well as ideologies of what it means to be female. Furthermore, it gives power to the lovers of popular culture who view the wonderful world of women as presented through the art of Walt Disney.

Disney presents viewers with positive images of women whom critics victimize by neglecting their actions and desires. In order to challenge the perception of critics who classify Disney women as inactive, this essay examines nine full-length animated features released to theaters between 1938 and 2002. Each selected film casts a human

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<sup>1</sup> Disney film revenues and audience turnouts are detailed by film in Leonard Maltin's book *The Disney Films*, as well as on the official Disney website at [disney.go.com](http://disney.go.com).

heroine as the lead, naming her in the title and giving importance to her story. While two of the films list an equal character in the title, this essay asserts that these films champion the feminine narrative and contribute to the depiction of the developing female of Disney film. There are two distinct eras of the Disney female in film. The first is that of the Feature Animation Studio under Walter Elias Disney, the co-founder, producer, and front man of Walt Disney Productions until his death in 1966. The films included during the reign of Walt are Snow White (1938), Cinderella (1950), Alice in Wonderland (1951), and Sleeping Beauty (1959). This analysis understands “Walt’s women” as narratives that characterize female desire, resilience and imagination. The films made after Walt’s death by “Team Disney” are narratives of transformation and empowerment through action and choice. Included in Disney’s second grouping of films are The Little Mermaid (1989), Beauty and the Beast (1991), Pocahontas (1995), Mulan (1998), and finally Lilo & Stitch (2002). Other than the original story Lilo & Stitch, all of the aforementioned are adaptations of preexisting stories such as fairy tales, folk tales, books, and legends.

The Disney formula is a series of familiar themes and motifs that analysts have articulated to describe the common format of the Disney animated feature film. Michael Ajzenstadt capriciously sums up his perception of the formula as, “Once upon a time there was a very clear set of rules for fairy tales. There was a damsel in distress. And if she waited long enough and was really worthy, a prince would eventually arrive and carry her off on his white horse and they would live happily ever after” (10). Janet Wasko expounds a little more seriously on the world according to Disney in chapter five of her book Understanding Disney. According to subscribers of the formula, the narrative of each film is adapted from an existing story and is always set in the past.

Songs added to the stories add emotion and signal change in the tale. The plot requires a hero(ine) who desires something, typically an escape, and who lands in trouble with an evil force. Good always triumphs over evil in a way that is justified and leaves no blame on the hero(ine). There is always a love pairing that ends happily ever after, and hero(ines) only pair up with other “good” characters. Whether for love or respect, the lead character attains their goal frequently rewarded with heightened social status or money. The characters in the Disney narrative are predictable and are starkly good or evil, nothing in between. Typically, critics feel that beauty equates with innocence and goodness while evil characters are ugly. Secondary characters lend their hand to both good and evil characters and frequently appear goofy with comically exaggerated features. “He (Walt Disney) liked humour and he liked animals and he usually added both to the plot” (DeWalt A16). Good middle-aged women are selfless, helpful mentors and often round in body. Evil middle-aged women are jealous and vain. If there are parents in the story, fathers have a temper, mothers do not, and stepmothers are plain evil. Disney often stands accused for their lack of representation of nuclear families and parents, especially the mother. Heroes are handsome, irresistible, and save the day. Finally, the area most interesting to this thesis is the concept that the Disney formula offers depictions of princesses that are young (no older than sixteen), beautiful, passive, stereotypical, dull, and ready only to fall in love with the hero. Disney shows signs of a formulaic narrative structure similar to the literary fairy tale genre. While some aspects of this formula are consistently part of Disney’s narratives, for instance the emphasis on good versus evil, others such as the characterizations of the heroine and hero are

generalizations. In spite of Disney's possible formulaic narratives, each heroine establishes herself separate from others.

## CHAPTER II: DISNEY AND FAIRY TALES

The Disney Company produces translations of widely known fairy tales to film in order to entertain all generations. The reliance on fairy tales is a productive practice for reaching the family because literary fairy tales are well established across generations. In Janet Wasko's analyses of the Disney formula, she supports the notion that Disney relies heavily on fairy tales that utilize themes of individualism, optimism, escape, imagination, innocence, romance, and good versus evil (114). These concepts appeal to the whole family by entertaining the younger audience with moralistic yet fun excitement as well as engaging adults in escapism and romantic narratives with which many identify. "Disney is addressing an audience of both adults and children which makes the texture of the film particularly dense" (Allan 50). Disney found ways to captivate both young boys and girls with their films while still appealing to the older members of the family, recognizing that parents must equally enjoy the films. Walt Disney consciously made an effort to entertain all ages as he commented, "You're dead if you aim only for kids. Adults are only kids grown up, anyway" ([http://wiki/Walt\\_Disney](http://wiki/Walt_Disney) 10). A similar statement quoted in Janet Wasko's book supports Walt's intentions, "I do not make films primarily for children. The worst of us is not without innocence, although buried deeply it might be. In my work, I try to reach and speak to that innocence" (qtd. in Wasko 118). Robin Allan quotes Disney's aim as early as his Snow White years, "We don't cater to the child but to the child in the adult-what we all imagined as kids is what we'd like to see pictured" (43). With their appreciation for the kid inside everyone, Disney allows each generation to

experience their films at any age by periodically re-releasing their films to theaters and on video.

The Disney Company embodies the transformative narratives and enduring nature of the fairy tale. Author Bruno Bettelheim, a respected author on this subject, expounds on the character of the fairy tale:

Each fairy tale is a magic mirror which reflects some aspects of our inner world. and of the steps required by our evolution from immaturity to maturity. For those who immerse themselves in what the fairy tale has to communicate, it becomes a deep, quiet pool which at first seems to reflect only our own image; but behind it we soon discover the inner turmoils of our soul-its depth, and ways to gain peace within ourselves and with the world, which is the reward of our struggles (qtd. in Stone, *Marchen* 244).

The Disney name is almost as synonymous with fairy tales as it is with the art of animation. Author Janet Wasko writes, “Disney’s versions of some of these (fairy tale) stories are sometimes better known than the originals, especially in the USA” (113). There are benefits that Disney reaps by incorporating the transformative fairy tales of the past. For instance, many of the fairytales Disney produces into full-length animated features are those that already existed popularly in the American memory such as the tales of Charles Perrault and the Brothers Grimm. The nature of the fairy tale with its multiple translations throughout time by different authors allows Disney to have similar capacity to rework the narrative for their interpretations, which often enhance secondary characters and add original musical scores. Leonard Maltin, a former Disney animator, addresses some of the changes made to the fairy tale plots. One challenge faced by Disney was “taking a simple tale and stretching it out to the length of a feature film, achieving the proper balance between the plot motivation of the central character and the comedy relief supplied” (28). Secondly, in order to prevent the main character from

appearing dull in comparison to other characters, they ensured “action never stayed with one character or setting too long” (28). The success and perseverance of the fairy tale narrative through time prevents Disney adaptations from seeming dated. In addition, fairy tales provide a safe environment to explore the world while supplying a template for self-reflection and challenging moral reasoning.

Disney’s film adaptations are an addition to the fairy tale continuum. While some people criticize Disney for their sanitized presentation of fairy tales, Kay Stone writes in “Marchen to Fairy Tale: An Unmagical Transformation” that many of the fairy tales known to us today are already whitewashed versions of the *Marchen*. The traditional *Marchen*, according to Kay Stone is a narrative of, “the balance of negative and positive forces and the threatening and difficult tasks to be accomplished before attaining spiritual happiness ever after” (233). The *Marchen* requires rebellion on the part of the lead role and champions the mate that enters the narrative as “symbolic recognition of hard won maturity” (233). In comparison to the traditional fairy tale that focuses primarily on love, relationships, and humor, the *Marchen* often incorporates serious and frightening themes of violence, justice and sometimes death, as did many of the Brothers Grimm stories. In fact, adults feared the impact of the *Marchen* on children so much that members of society wanted it banned all together; nevertheless, it persevered chiefly in the form of the “romanticized or humorous fairy tale” (235). She recognizes Disney’s serious admiration for fantasy and appreciation for those who dream within his “superb visual images and interesting twists of plot and characterization” (236). In her article, Stone appreciates Disney for its incorporation of aspects of the *Marchen* such as emphasis on negative forces. Nonetheless, due to the overwhelming number of humorous secondary

characters, the Disney narrative “has come to represent the epitome of the fairy tale” (238).

The animated films of Walt Disney are the personification of fantasy. Consequently, some critics misconstrue this world of fantasy as a meager portrayal of actual society. Leonard Maltin addresses this perception in his book The Disney Films: “Disney’s animated features strove for the effect of a fantasy world set against realistic backgrounds: just true enough to be believable. What these critics miss is the fact that Disney never favored the realism in his cartoons at all; rather, it was an idealization of real life...” (13). Walter E. Disney himself addressed his critics’ comments with the following statement “I would rather entertain and hope that people learned something than educate people and hope they were entertained” ([http://wiki/Walt\\_Disney](http://wiki/Walt_Disney) 10). It was the attitudes and translations of the Disney Company that made it apparent that there is a deep appreciation for the essence of fantasy in fairy tales.

Disney women dominate the realm of fantasy. In the worlds of the imagination, women’s dreams, desires, and actions are at the forefront. By definition, fantasy is synonymous with imagination, dream, hope and desire. These aspects are as deep-seated in the fairy tale as they are in the Disney heroines. If the fairy tale is the journey, then fantasy is the driving force consequently leading dreams, hopes and wishes to construct the narrative. Fantasy is an empowering tool for females, because it encourages them to picture and strive for their dreams. Elizabeth Bell supports the power of women in fantasy: “It is the worlds of women-worlds of song and power and care-that offer alternatives to institutional hierarchy, science and technology, and divine rights of kings. The women in these films are not bifurcated into good and bad, but represent a

continuum of cultural representations of women's powers and performances" (121). Every heroine from Snow White to Lilo illuminates her imagination through song and voice. Henke, Umble, and Smith highlight the fact that "Cinderella, Aurora, Ariel, Belle, and Pocahontas also share another quality: they all have dreams" (235). Each woman expresses a desire for love, for escape, or for transformation, all of which are parts of fantasy that drive her narrative. The most beloved of Disney's animated films are traditionally the female lead fairy tale. In Disney's adaptations of the fairy tale, women play central roles, not only do they dominate the titles, but they also hold a firm grip on villains, and secondary characters.

### CHAPTER III: THE CONTESTED TERRAIN OF DISNEY WOMEN

Regardless of what they understand to be the films' fairy tale status, a plentiful number of people criticize the manner in which the Walt Disney Company portrays females in their full-length animated features. Rose DeWolf addresses the polarized critiques of Disney in her article "The Curse of the Disney Movie." She writes, "Disney will always draw criticism. Either a film will be seen as too goody-goody or, from a more critical point of view, a reinforcement of some doubtful values. For example, some see Snow White as an early feisty female because she goes off alone to escape the wicked queen. But others disdain her as just another one-track-mind babe worried only about which day her prince will come" (A16). More frequent than not, Disney regularly stands accused of depicting its heroines as passive women who rely on men to either save them, guide them, or marry them. Jack Zipes agrees that Disney heroines heavily rely on males to chart their lives, "despite their beauty and charm, these figures are pale and pathetic compared to the more active and demonic characters in the film. The young women are



helpless ornaments in need of protection, and when it comes to the action of the film, they are omitted" (37). Similarly, these female protagonists draw criticism for providing poor examples of women to impressionable young viewers of these films. Jacqueline Layng is among writers who suggest that Disney's depictions of females promote stereotypical representations of gender. She argues that all the heroines are flawlessly beautiful, dependant and powerless. Kay Stone expounds on this notion in a contrast between hero's actions and heroine's inactions, "The only tests of most heroines require nothing beyond what they are born with, a beautiful face, tiny feet, or a pleasing temperament" (qtd. in Wasko 133). Ultimately, many Disney critics believe that the heroine supports patriarchal ideology through her action, body, desire, relationships and her speech. Kathi Maio summarizes the range of Disney heroines as consistently portraying the stereotypical happy homemakers from 1938's Snow White to Mulan in 1998, "At heart, they all still identify with male authority instead of seeking their own empowerment. And in the end a good-looking boyfriend remains the truest measure of feminine happiness and success" (14). Likewise, authors Henke, Umble, and Smith criticize Disney films as supporting traditional patriarchal society with, "the image of the 'perfect girl,' while punishing inquisitive girls by labeling them disobedient and peculiar. Several of the heroines in these films suffer for challenging conventional expectations, and eventually all but one abandons her dreams for a definition of happiness within marriage" (247). Unfortunately, this condemnation of Disney perpetuating patriarchy through stereotypical representations of women narrows the scope of femininity by neglecting the actions, choices and dreams of the heroine that appeal to members of the audience and society.

In addition to the static view of heroines, some critics flout Disney for the lack of notable progression in their female lead characters throughout the years. This is evidenced by statements such as Pamela O'Brien's central thesis that, "the gender ideology in Disney films has changed very little over the company's history; new films merely have updated presentations to make traditional values seem more relevant to a new generation" (156). Susan Riley supports this with her statement, "this doesn't look like progress to me, only an updating of essentially limiting stereotypes. The modern cartoon heroine may aspire to a career, but if she doesn't snag a handsome prince, too, she hasn't really succeeded" (D6). Jacqueline Layng's statement in her article, "The Animated Woman" supports that Disney creates homeostatic images of women that are contrary to the advances of women in our society, "Women's position in society has changed since the 1937 premier of Snow White, but in Disney's world, little has changed" (207).

On the contrary, other writers believe that the Disney heroine markedly evolved throughout the years. Sleeping Beauty (1959) was Walt E. Disney's final full-length animated feature with a lead heroine before his death on December 15, 1966 of lung cancer. It was not until thirty years later that the Disney Company would return to the formula with The Little Mermaid (1989). Jim Keogh who initially appears to be a Disney critic for his narrow assessment of Walt Disney's early films admits to a noticeable progression in Disney's heroine over those thirty years in his article, "Disney makes progress on female characters":

Remember the Disney cartoons where the only interesting women were witches and evil stepmothers? In many of the studio's earlier films, a lovely ingénue made her way through the world, getting knocked about by tough times and

exhibiting peculiar behavior. Cinderella scrubbed floors and talked to mice. Snow White escaped a murder plot and hung out with dwarfs. Sleeping Beauty also had a death threat hanging over her head when three fairies hid her away deep in the forest, where she picked berries and danced with woodland animals. Cinderella, as we all know, was saved by a handsome prince with a glass-slipper fetish. The remaining two young ladies slipped into deep comas-one after pricking her finger on a spinning wheel, the other after eating a poisonous apple-and were awakened by the kiss of a handsome prince...TIMES CHANGED (C2).

Whereas his assessment seems minimalist, his point reads loud and clear throughout the article as he lauds the post-1959 heroines Ariel, Belle, Pocahontas, and Mulan for being scrappy, engaging, resourceful, athletic, independent, and tough. Rebecca-Anne C. Do Rozario has written an article for Women's Studies in Communication supporting the measurable development of the Disney princess from 1959 to 1989. She distinguishes the two eras of heroines as, Walt's princesses and the latter as Team Disney's princesses, which began with The Little Mermaid. Rebecca-Anne C. Do Rozario analyses the activities, roles, and relationships to depict the maturation of the Disney heroine. She compares Walt's princesses who, "scrubbed and waited with boundless cheerful energy knowing that these chores of their peasant past would be taken from them and they would again waltz into a regal future" with the Team Disney's princess' increased autonomy, activity, fun, and ability to disrupt patriarchy (57). Henke, Umble, and Smith disagree with Do Rozario's analysis of the Disney heroine. In their article "Construction of the Female Self: Feminist Readings of the Disney Heroine" the authors argue that all the heroines ultimately reinforce the status quo. However, the article does grant that "later Disney films (beginning with The Little Mermaid) shift from simple stories of passive, young virgins in conflict with evil, mature women toward increasingly complex narratives about rebellion, exploration, and danger" (234). A Disney screenwriter adds

that they consciously, “are trying to make today’s heroines active, aggressive and likeable (by) building on a fairy tale and manipulating characters to reflect current social values” (qtd in Kaplan 24). Whereas even some critics of Disney concede that there is progression in the heroine’s level of activity through time, many still resist reading each individual character as dynamic. However, the process of reading Disney’s females as positive and active defies patriarchy by relinquishing the notion that women are victims. When critics characterize Disney women as passive or stereotypical it is because they frequently impose current societal values on older films, or because they bias certain female attributes as negative. For example, when critics focus on the outer beauty of a heroine, they often neglect her inner beauty. In addition, they limit portions of femininity by negating the heroine’s action, which gives precedence to weakness rather than desire as the driving force of the narrative. Conversely, this next group of critics gives priority to the heroine’s choices and fantasies as the driving force of the story.

A different group of theorists challenges the critique of Disney heroines as passive with a contrary narrative of feminine empowerment. The potential for a dualistic reading of Disney’s characters suggests that consumption of a film is open to the interpretation of each subjective viewer. “The rules of the game are that, viewers are free to interpret the finished film as they wish” (qtd in DeWolf A16). Therefore, while some narrowly see Disney’s women as characterless, others understand them within a different and more participatory context that broadens the spectrum of femininity. Belinda Stott is among the writers that challenge the status quo by rereading different interpretations of Cinderella, including Disney’s. Stott writes that while others find Cinderella to be the pinnacle of passivity, she is able to appreciate the endurance and insight of the leading

character. An example of Stott's different subjectivity is visible in her passage about Cinderella's name:

Her victimhood is signified by her enforced affinity with the cinders 'in the chimney corner', and this image has a number of implications. The fact that she is called Cinderella suggests that her individual identity is based upon negativity and being perceived as outwardly and inwardly worthless. However, the image of cinders, as the final and enduring residue of fire and the favoured environment of the phoenix, also symbolizes that rebirth, healing and regeneration are possible after death in the material world (19).

Author Kay Stone wrote in her 1996 article, "And she lived happily ever after?" about the polarized perceptions surrounding characters such as the traditional heroine. She explains how her interpretation of fairy tale heroines was challenged by a group of storytellers that she interviewed to better understand how some people could see a character as empowering whom she perceives only as an overt victim. Kay recalls her mother's consideration of Cinderella as "adventurous because she disobeyedly went to the ball" conceding she "would never have done that" (2). Whereas Stone has a history of concluding Disney's heroines are passive in previous articles, her mother's words consummated in a realization that Kay herself needed to reevaluate what she considers heroic in terms of the leading females in fairy tales. This group of people, including her mother, concentrates on what the heroine did rather than focusing on what she did not do. What this does is give credence to adept action over inaction in a clash of "doing" versus "being." Stone recognizes the way her peers view the heroine's narrative, "(They) stress action over abuse. They do not deny victimization, they simply do not credit it as the driving force in these stories" (4). This perspective that emphasizes action allows the women to identify with these stories as tales of transformation, endurance, and empowerment. Kay's understanding of this new subjectivity seems to amend the former

stance in her 1975 article, "Things Walt Disney Never Told Us" where she had denounced people who view passive heroines as active for "perform(ing) a fascinating feat of selective memory" (49). Whereas, Kay Stone's articles tend to focus on fairy tales rather than film adaptations, the techniques she learned from the storytellers fittingly applies to Disney films, which are largely reliant on the tales of Charles Perrault, the Brothers Grimm and a selection of others.

#### CHAPTER IV: WALT'S WOMEN

Walter E. Disney's films are narratives of overcoming obstacles and of daring to dream. His team produced some of the most memorable films in the Disney cannon. Many recognized these films for their utilization of popular fairy tales and the introduction of unforgettable secondary characters, which Walt used to enhance the journey of the heroine. Disney understood that females made up approximately eighty percent of his viewing audience and he was always cognizant of his spectators when he created the story line for his films (Allan 42). Disney effectively reached his audience with Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs (1938) despite the criticism of the film industry that dubbed his project "Disney's Folly" for they figured a full-length animated feature would definitely lead to the bankruptcy of Disney ([http://wiki/Walt\\_Disney](http://wiki/Walt_Disney) 4). Judging by the overall success of his films Disney gave the audience what they wanted, proving his own tale of fantasy, dreams and overcoming obstacles.

##### *Snow White* (1938)

The first Disney heroine to overcome an obstacle was Snow White. Disney released the first full-length animated feature Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs to the public on February 4, 1938. Disney's Snow White is an adaptation of the Brothers

Grimm tale about a beautiful young girl whose jealous stepmother hatches a plot to have her murdered. It is a tale of one girl's path towards maturation through the endurance of hard times. In the original 19<sup>th</sup> Century German version, Snow White escapes the Queen, finds shelter in the forest with seven dwarfs, a peddler woman makes her fall into a deep sleep, and after a series of events, she wakes up and marries a prince. Janet Wasko outlines a few major differences between the two narratives: In the Brothers Grimm tale Snow White's mother dies and her father is alive (albeit with little significance in the story); in Disney's version there are no parents. The Brothers Grimm had the evil witch visit Snow White three times in the forest, as opposed to one in the film. The endings of the two narratives differ in terms of the evil queen's demise, instead of falling off a cliff, the fairy tale forces her to dance in red-hot iron shoes at Snow White's wedding until she dies. Wasko also offers that the Disney version gave the prince a more significant role than the fairy tale version by having him appear twice rather than Grimm's singular appearance at the end. Finally, Disney's Snow White awakens with the kiss of true love rather than the accidental jarring of the poison apple lodged in her throat (129-30). Some people use these changes to depict the conscious choices made by the Disney Company signifying the heroine as passive and reinforcing patriarchy. Writers consider Snow White the prototype for Disney films to follow it: "set a standard for full-length animation and established a pattern for later Disney heroines to follow" (Maio 12). Therefore, as the prototype it is worth looking closely at Snow White to see the conventions she introduced to the genre.

Snow White is the first heroine without a mother. The frequent lack of the mother in Disney films illuminates the journey of the heroine. Although, the Brothers Grimm

fairy tale also had the mother die at childbirth Disney's Snow White is the first film with an absent mother. Most critics crucify Disney for the removal of the mother figure from its stories. "Disney—the trademark castle shown in the dictionary next to wholesome traditional values—rarely depicts an intact family in its animated feature films" (Collison 1E). Cathy Lynn Grossman interprets the Disney parents in this way: "Dads-- dim or dundering, adoring or distant- abound on the Disney screen. But Mom is almost always dead, unconscious or unmentioned. One message I've never been able to shake off: Mom won't be there for you. Mom will never wave a magic wand and make everything wonderful" (12A). Lynda Haas contributes a chapter to the book From Mouse to Mermaid called "Eighty-Six the Mother" that addresses the matricide of the mother in film as a form of reinstituting patriarchy. She feels that Disney is a reflection of Western culture where "a requisite cultural taboo has also been placed on the relationship with the mother (Bell, Haas, Sells 195). Whereas Haas focuses on the removal of the mother from Disney films as a negative act, if put in a different perspective the absence of the mother contributes to the focus on the strength of the heroine. "One of the things fairy tales do is teach children to be more independent" (qtd in Stevenson 1D). According to Maltin, the film initially showed a scene of Snow White's mother dying in childbirth however; they eliminated it at the last minute (29). Robin Allan offers, "The artists were told to stress Snow White's isolation" (39). This isolation of the heroine reinforces that her story is the pivotal focus of the narrative. All of Disney's lead heroines are in their teens and thus are at an age that they must define themselves.<sup>2</sup> Psychologists and sociologists commonly agree that adolescence is a time when children tend to break away from the family and

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<sup>2</sup> Robin Allan writes on page 38 of Walt Disney and Europe that Disney's Snow White was fourteen a change from the Grimm's depicted age of seven.



rely heavily on themselves and their peer groups. Although Disney recognizes no conscious effort to “eighty-six” the mother, their portrayals mirror the typical social behavior of teenage girls through her absence. Thus, by not defining in her relationship to her mother the films give the heroine her autonomy. The fact that they must rely on their own experience, resourcefulness, and instinct to survive reinforces the assertion that these are tales of singular endurance, maturation and transformation. It is precisely the destabilization of the family that allows the manifestation of the chaotic environment necessary for the maturation of the heroine. Kevin Collison, who criticized Disney’s representation of the parents but ends with a change of heart when he considers the possible difference in narratives with the addition of the mother.

Maybe not having Mom around allows all kinds of mischief and keeps the story moving. I mean, dads have the reputation for being the fun parent while Mom has to be the practical one. Belle’s mom would have packed her off to boarding school...as for Pocahontas, her mom would have locked her in the wigwam after finding out about her crush on John Smith...Maybe Disney knows what it’s doing after all (1E).

Additionally, the absence of the mother opens the door for evil women. Frequently, as in Snow White, the absence of the mother allows for the entrance of the femme fatale, often in the form of a stepmother. Lauren Dundes even suggests that the stepmother replaces the mother so that the mother figure is not the one demonized (120). The femme fatale serves to contrast the heroine’s goodness and virtue as well as constructing conflict for her to overcome on the path to maturation.<sup>3</sup> The absent mother allows the femme fatale to create conflict for the heroine often using the “princess’s first true love against her in order to secure the kingdom for herself” (43). On the surface, it

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<sup>3</sup> Many critics feel that Disney creates their villainesses as ugly, which draws the deduction that power and evil equates to ugly. However, the films of Walt Disney provided some of the favorite and most beautiful villains of all time according to the Disney official website.

appears that the evil witches and stepmothers are the most powerful women of Disney films. However, like fairy godmothers and other secondary women in the films these characters never fully develop because they would usurp the focus from the heroine. Do Rozario finds solace in the strength and ability of Disney's early femme fatale to disrupt patriarchy and compares them to the progressing role of the later heroines of "Team Disney" (44). The femme fatale contributes her own feminine attributes to Disney film, while supporting the heroine's narrative through conflict and contrast."

Snow White is a reflection of the times. She cooks and cleans, but like the women of this era who endured the Depression, Snow White also perseveres. Jacqueline Layng writes that "The actions of Snow White parallel the situation of a woman in the era of the 1930's in United States of America" (203). Anthony Montesano who feels they "reflect the norms of the period in which they were made" supports this. (qtd in DeWolf A16). Too many critics focus on the domesticity of Snow White rather than appreciating her other positive attributes for example, "Having done her part by being perfectly lovely and thoroughly domestic, all Snow White has to do is wait" (Arthur GO1). There is a need for a subjectivity readjustment for a 21<sup>st</sup> century viewer of this 1930's film based on a 19<sup>th</sup> century fairy tale. Consider a position similar to storytellers in Kay Stone's 1996 article who "stress action over abuse...They do not deny victimization, they simply do not credit it as the driving force in these stories" (4). Rather than taking a 21<sup>st</sup> century view that fixates on Snow White's housework as a reinforcement of patriarchy, let us recognize the empowering actions of Snow White. When Snow White is in fear of her life and cast out of her home by the evil queen, she boldly takes it upon herself to enter

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<sup>4</sup> For further discussion on the roles of secondary women in Disney film, see Do Rozario "The Princess and the Magic Kingdom" and Bell's "Somatexts at the Disney Shop".

the empty house of the dwarfs despite the animated fear of her woodland friends. Upon her arrival she realizes that she is intruding, but her need for refuge supersedes niceties. In order to secure her place of safety, she relies on what she knows. Snow White cleans their house only because she hopes to sway the owners to let her stay. Despite the uncertainty of her future, Snow White remains positive singing songs like, "With a Smile and a Song," while displaying an ability to take control of herself and her surroundings.

While in the forest, Snow White encounters the first group of Disney's on-screen secondary characters. Disney's focus on the dwarf characters reinforces Snow White's strengths. The dwarfs encourage her to articulate her own story when they beg her "to tell a story, a true story, about love." Because of her positioning in their home, Snow White challenges patriarchy through her relationship with the dwarfs. Most obviously, Snow White contrasts the overtly misogynistic Grumpy, who feels "She's a female! And all females is poison! They're full of wicked wiles" and resists her attempts to "civilize" him. By the end of the narrative, even Grumpy accepts the fair-skinned princess and her "water lily" ways, as he is grief stricken when she falls under the evil queen's spell. Whereas, some critics feel Snow White is passive and barely speaks, this is countered by her contrast with another of the dwarfs. Dopey presents at first as mute, however we learn that he never tried even to talk. If critics thought Snow White was passive and had few spoken lines, at least she tried to talk. Similarly, the depiction of the other dwarfs make attributes of masculinity appear laughable in comparison to her secure femininity, a pattern followed in subsequent Disney films. Similar to secondary women their personalities never fully develop. All we learn about the dwarfs is that they dig in a mine, they don't wash, and they personify their names, Bashful, Grumpy, Dopey and so

forth. The dwarfs first return home starkly contrasts her initial entrance into the realm of the unknown house. The scene of the dwarfs' returning home to a perceived intruder exhibits a humorous sketch of seven blubbing, fearful men creeping back into their own room. They are so laughable even the birds take pleasure in scaring them. Of all the choices to send upstairs, they pick the mute Dopey. Conversely, Snow White confidently entered the unfamiliar house in the woods, getting straight down to business securing a place of safety while displaying more courage than the men do.

Many authors criticize Disney for its exaggeration of the love story in fairy tales. Some people feel that the coupling at the end signifies that marriage equates to lifetime happiness. Interestingly enough, Snow White never shows a wedding, it is only assumed that the couple married. This omission allows the viewer to subjugate the traditional idea that marriage equates to happiness to the idea that resilience provides reward and happiness. Whereas, the Brothers Grimm fairy tale ends with Snow White wedding a prince, Disney introduces the prince earlier in the narrative. Disney has met with much criticism for the additional scenes of the prince. However, his early introduction provides little significance to the story other than providing places to interject songs and "taking a simple tale and stretching it out to the length of a feature film" (Maltin 28). Prince Charming was only in two scenes deliberately "because they [animators] felt he looked unbearably stiff (Maltin 29). Disney cut additional scenes of the prince and further building of romance because he "lacked robustness and credibility as a character" (Allan 44). Essentially, the generically named Prince Charming has less personality than the seven dwarfs and Snow White. His rigid two appearances and lack of speaking parts present him as prosaic in comparison to Snow White's range of emotion in her "thirteen

of the film's twenty scenes" (Allan 58). While Snow White is "wishing for the one I love to find me today," the prince's two scenes simply bookend the narrative of Snow White's journey. The conclusion is not a suggestion that women need to marry in order for happiness and security. Rather, the addition of romance is a recognition of female desire as well as a method of depicting maturation through the subtext of dating. The prince, almost as stationary as the Oscar statue, similarly functions as a symbolic award for the heroine's great performance through her narrative. Even the austere critic Jorjet Harper bluntly acknowledges that prince charming "has no personality and plays no part in the drama except for his deus ex machina at the end" (24). Arguably the princes of Walt Disney's films are more passive in presentation than the princesses.

Snow White offers the prototype for the Disney heroines of the future. Snow White showed us how the absence and presence of secondary characters serve the purpose of explicating the heroine's journey. This new understanding of Snow White shatters the conception that she is "The archetype of the romance-driven Disney heroine" (Dudek 1) or passive for doing nothing to "get her man" (Ajzenstadt 10) because her drive is self-preservation rather than romance; love comes as a result. She is hardly the "passive figure both victimized and rescued solely on the basis of her extraordinary beauty... Frozen and silent" (Thompson 1). Nor is she as shallow as Janet Maslin describes, "Snow White is a Drip...with no distinct personality" (21). Her personality reflects modesty because although she is "the fairest of them all" she never flaunts it. She is never defeated or hopeless, and remains optimistic when faced with hardships as evidenced by the song she sings after emerging from one of the scariest scenes in the woods, "With a smile and a song, there is no use in grumbling when the raindrops come

tumbling. Remember, you're the one who can fill the world with sunshine." She is resourceful, friendly and considerate as her experiences with the dwarfs and animals show us. Her personality made her, "So beautiful in death, that the dwarfs could not find it in their hearts to bury her." Multiple authors wrote that the evil witch was more physically appealing than Snow White, so it was personality rather than beauty that made Snow White "fairer" than the queen. This is supported by the comment the Magic Mirror makes when describing the fairest of them all, "Famed is thy beauty, Majesty. But hold, a lovely maid I see. Rags cannot hide her gentle grace. Alas, she is more fair than thee." Snow White's strength of character contributed the foundation for subsequent heroines to build upon in the future.

#### *Cinderella (1950)*

Cinderella follows some of the standards set by Snow White. For example, she comes from a broken family, she meets multiple secondary characters, and she encounters a prince. Similarly, it builds on the groundwork of Snow White with its narrative of resilience. On February 15, 1950, Disney released Cinderella, its second animated film featuring a female lead. Having no largely successful films since Snow White, The Disney Company was again in financial danger near the WWII years and returned to the fairy tale formula. Disney's Cinderella relies heavily on the fairy tale adaptation of 17<sup>th</sup> Century French author Charles Perrault rather than the Brothers Grimm version. This decision enabled the incorporation of Perrault's fairy godmother, pumpkin coach and glass slipper. In Perrault's version, Cinderella goes to the ball three times rather than once in the film. Disney utilized the animal helpers from the Brother's Grimm as a way to echo the narrative struggle between Cinderella and her stepfamily.

However, the Grimms' other, more violent images were too lofty for his public. Despite finding Cinderella as domestic and obedient, author Naomi Wood feels that through Walt Disney's interpretive choices, "the heroine of each tale was fleshed out with more dialogue and action than the tales of Grimm and Perrault deemed necessary" (30). Disney consciously tried to make Cinderella more interesting, "I'd make Cinderella a sparkling, alive girl, even going so far as to give her a few human weaknesses. In this way we can prove that Cinderella really did live and that she still lives in the heart of every young girl that dreams" (qtd in Stone Marchen 237). Many felt that the themes of Walt Disney's films reflected his own perceived need to overcome obstacles. "Cinderella also contains the survival theme which is an element of all the features" (Allan 207). The resilient narrative is one of a young girl whose mother died and her father remarried so that his daughter would have a "mother's care." Unfortunately, he too died, leaving her with an evil stepmother and two stepsisters. The film's narration explains Cinderella's establishing situation:

Thus, as time went by, the chateau fell into disrepair, for the family fortune was squandered on the vain and selfish stepsisters, while Cinderella was abused, mistreated, and finally forced to become a servant in her own house. And yet, through it all, Cinderella remained ever gentle and kind. For with each dawn, she found new hope that someday, her dreams of happiness would come true.

The last line of the narration shows the viewer that Cinderella has a positive disposition and maintains control of her life as she enters the film singing the song, "A Dream is a Wish Your Heart Makes... Have faith in your dreams and someday your rainbow will come smiling through. No matter how your heart is grieving, if you keep on believing, the dream that you wish will come true." Despite her situation, Cinderella provide a

positive role model in her declaration, “they can’t order me to stop dreaming.” Cinderella’s dreams provide the fantasy needed to drive the fairy tale narrative.

In spite of Cinderella’s assertions and actions, critics often pass over her achievements and the significance of her dreams. Although Cinderella continues to strive for her dreams, critics argue, “it is an exposition of the relationship between dreams and their fulfillment, it promises that those women who follow the rules by being self-contained and submissive to a patriarchal order will be rewarded” (Wood 27). Peggy Thompson summarizes the story as, “Cinderella’s happy ending is also defined as marriage to a man she’s met only once...Moreover, she meets her prince only through the efforts of her absent minded godmother and ingenious mice friends. The heroine herself does nothing but dream to change her unhappy situation” (1). Jennifer Stevenson goes so far as to accuse her of simply “whimpering in a corner” (1D). These notions of passivity seem to relate to Cinderella’s dreaming, her endurance of abuse from her stepfamily, and her crying. Regrettably, these assessments narrow Cinderella’s femininity by neglecting her actions, relationships and desires that contribute to her femininity. No woman should be shamed for showing emotion, or for desiring to escape a bad situation for a good one. In a 1975 article, Kay Stone wrote that Cinderella along with Snow White and Sleeping Beauty are “so passive they have to be reawakened to life by a man,” and later alluding they are a How-To guidebook for passivity (43). This early view focuses solely on Cinderella’s housework, her patience with the abusive stepfamily, and the ending with the prince. Even chief illustrator of the film, Leonard Maltin believes Cinderella gets a bad rap. “She is a victim of circumstances who is determined not to be defeated by it” (Dudek 1). Judging by her later article in 1996 where she



revisits Cinderella with her mother and a group of storytellers, Kay is able to see the positive attributes of an alternative view, which focuses on competent actions of the heroine. Her own mother recognized Cinderella's determination to go to the ball despite her stepmother. Considering the release of the film as a reflection of idealism after WWII, Cinderella made an effort to escape a bad situation and make her dreams come true.

Cinderella asserts her identity and chases her dreams. She does not dream because she cannot resist her abusers, she dreams in spite of them. This is visible in a number of places for instance when initially denied the right to go to the ball she states her right by declaring, "And why not, I'm still a member of the family." Similarly, she claims her identity as the rightful owner of the slipper and heir to the prince's heart when she produces the glass slipper at the end of the story. Belinda Stott writes about Cinderella's resourcefulness, "Can Cinderella really be considered as a passive victim when she has the forethought to conceal and hold onto a symbol that represents both her true worth and the pathetic incongruity of her present victim position, only to produce it at the most opportune moment" (17). Stott's article examines the empowerment that readers can find in the story of Cinderella by rejecting the temptation of participating in the victimization of her. "Cinderella can be viewed as a positive female role model, promoting female strength and endurance and the understanding that victim hood can be overcome by accessing inner female strengths and using these productively to pursue non-victim hood" (25). These inner female strengths such as positive mental attitude are what allowed her to overcome abuse at the hands of her stepfamily. Were it not for her constant dreaming and belief in something better, Cinderella would perish at the hands of

her captors. As the fairy godmother reassures her when she thinks all is lost, “If you'd lost all your faith, I couldn't be here.” When Kay Stone criticized Disney for “neglect(ing) to tell us that Cinderella’s freedom does not always end at midnight” she neglected to realize that Cinderella’ freedom did last past that initial strike of twelve on the night of the ball for she escaped the stepmother and actively pursued a happier life with the prince (50).

Another misconception that many critics hold is that Cinderella was reliant on secondary characters. Pamela O’Brien writes that, “patriarchy is recuperated through the characters of the male mice, Jacques and Gus-Gus, who continually rescue Cinderella” (162). If there is one thing that Snow White taught us it is that secondary characters simply enhance the story of the heroine. The mice in the story did steal the key out of Lady Tremain’s pocket when Cinderella was locked away. However, this is a direct result of their loyalties to her for saving them multiple times from mousetraps and the house cat Lucifer. Secondly, the mice only retrieved the key and got it as far as the door to Cinderella’s room before Lucifer caught them under a cup. Cinderella had to think quickly before she missed a chance to reveal her identity as the prince’s love and told the birds to get Bruno to scare Lucifer and retrieve the key to her freedom. Therefore, Cinderella took the initiative in her own escape and made her dreams come true, a lesson that is mastered and enhanced by Disney’s third heroine.

#### *Alice in Wonderland* (1951)

Alice in Wonderland is the equivalent of Peter Pan for girls with its promoting the female imagination and desire for wild adventure. Walt Disney brings out the vibrancy of the female imagination in Alice in Wonderland. Walt Disney had often incorporated

the character of Alice into a number live action shorts. However, he reluctantly created the animated feature at the request of a group of ladies that visited the company (Allan 211). On July 28, 1951 the Disney combination of author Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass* opened to American audiences as Alice in Wonderland. This film was an experimental film that met with harsh criticism and poor box office returns; however, it would go on to be the first of the Disney films released on television where it met with better reception as the years progressed. The initial box office sales of Alice suffered because it was too progressive for the conservative time of release.

Snow White and Cinderella longed for a better place while enduring tragedy, Alice simply creates a world in a story where she is the central figure. This world provides adventure, drama, and thrills for females of all types. What is particularly interesting is that the audience views the film through Alice's mind. This choice of artistic style places Alice's mind as the main character, giving significance to Alice's mind as a creative and active force. Deborah Ross wrote the article, "Escape from Wonderland" about the use and consequence of dreams in three Disney films. Ross is one of a very short list of critics to incorporate Alice into her writings on Disney. She argues that a number of media, including Disney's Alice in Wonderland, have used popular aspects of culture to police the dreams of girls. She feels that authors that are more progressive "encourage young women readers' belief in fantasy to help them visualize what they want, perhaps as a first step toward going after it" (Paragraph 7). She concedes that some of the film's conservatism is due to the time of release in 1951 and grants that the beginning of the film has appealing aspects such as Alice's initial

curiosity, and her ability to manage her size. However, by neglecting the realm of imagination that Alice creates Ross fails to recognize the “progressive” nature of the Alice character. Instead, she focuses on the portion of the plot where Alice is frustrated with the characters in her new world and wishes to home. When a broom-dog creature erases the path, Alice begins to cry and in Ross’s words, “passively sits down to wait to be rescued, all the while lecturing herself about the importance of reason and patience, berating herself for the curiosity that once again has led her into trouble” (paragraph 16). An alternative reading of this section focuses not on what Alice says, but what she does. Despite her momentary loss of literal and figurative footing, Alice determines her own course of action. Whereas, she tells herself that “Be patient is good advice but waiting makes me curious. I went on my way and didn’t reason I should have known there would be a price to pay. Will I ever learn to do the things I should” she dares to do what she wants rather than what society teaches her she should. She falters for a minute and then throws caution to the wind as she delves deeper into her quest and follows the Cheshire Cat to the Queen’s castle. Whenever Alice reflects on the “good advice” people gave her, she never follows it because the call for adventure is too great. As Alice climbs deeper into her rabbit hole, she forgets her worries and her thoughts of returning home.

Alice routinely challenges order, rejects labels and controls her unusual circumstances. Throughout the film, characters attempt to label Alice as a flower, a weed, and a serpent. As evidenced by the caterpillar’s demand to know, “Who are you,” it seems that the other characters are less comfortable with the realm of the unknown than Alice is. She refuses to define herself on other people’s terms. In addition, Alice speaks up for herself at the Queen’s trial. Far from the charming Snow White, and the passively

aggressive Cinderella, Alice tells the Queen, "But that just isn't the way." As she masterfully manipulates her size with the mushroom, she calls the Queen a "fat, pompous, bad tempered old tyrant." The fact that she waits until she is larger only couples with the growth of her nerve to stand up to a ruthless dictator that everyone in the land fears, emphasizing her ability to stand alone. Alice masters the land of nonsense, where everything is supposedly "the Queen's way" and challenges those who try to silence her.

Ross argues that the Alice's make believe characters function to scare and shame Alice with her own imagination so that she will rethink her curiosity and return home. Whereas this thesis grants that some of the characters such as Tweedle-Dee and Tweedle-Dum warn her about the dangers of curiosity with the oyster and walrus tale, what is more interesting is that she continuously rejects these characters as nonsense. The secondary character's reinforcement of rules and manners are nonsense in her words, "If I had a world of my own, everything would be nonsense. Nothing would be what it is because everything would be what it isn't. And contrary-wise; what it is it wouldn't be, and what it wouldn't be, it would. You see?" Alice continues to do what she "shouldn't" by other people's standards. Deborah Ross also assumes that Alice only wants to write a book about the experience to avoid living out her dreams because "Writing a story...is much safer than living one" (paragraph 18). The significant problem with this assumption is that when Alice says, "When I get home I shall write a book about this place... If I ever do get home" she is surpassing imagination by planning to bring her world home and share it with others along with the good and the bad. Alice not only creates a world, she claims it, and finds it significant enough to share with others.

Secondly, when she wakes up in the real world and her sister asks her to recite her lesson she recites the lesson that the caterpillar taught her, which reinforces that Alice kept some of her world with her when she returned home. Alice keeping a part of her world gives precedence to her nontraditional ways and her adventurous curiosity by allowing her to inject it into the “real world”. Despite her leaps and bounds for female imagination, Alice may have been too much for the traditional times of its release, thus Disney answered the period with the conservative Sleeping Beauty.

#### *Sleeping Beauty* (1959)

Admittedly, Sleeping Beauty is a step backward from Alice in Wonderland in terms of assertiveness and imagination. However, the lead character Aurora (or Briar Rose) is worth examining to understand her contributions to the portrayals of Disney femininity. The low box office returns of Alice, led the Disney Company to return to the traditional fairy tale adaptation. Unfortunately, Sleeping Beauty also failed upon its release in 1959, nearly bankrupting the studio by not returning as much as it cost to produce. Sleeping Beauty, like Cinderella incorporates a Charles Perrault tale along with influences from Tchaikovsky’s ballet of the same name. In this film, Disney was particularly concerned with improving the animation of his humans. The difficulty of animating lifelike humans always led Walt to use human models for his characters. Walt was dissatisfied with the animation in previous films and overly emphasized the careful use of models for Sleeping Beauty so that her character appears more believable than ever before. Elizabeth Bell highlights the significance of the use of live models for animation in her article, “Somatexts at the Disney Shop”. She emphasizes that many of the real women who modeled for the Disney heroines were dancers with lean and

powerful bodies. The significance she says is that beneath the animation, “their (the real women) bodies are portraits of strength, discipline, and control, performing the dancing roles of princesses” (112). Bell states that because of the bodies beneath the animation,

The secret revelations of the tale are graphically depicted in the Disney films. The films celebrate the ambiguity, the diversity, and potency of women’s bodies, and the multiple sites and sources of their cultural construction. Moreover, these constructed performances are rooted in a physical timeline that decrees that these bodies will change: from the tentative strength of youth, to the confident carriage of middle age, to the aplomb of old age (121).

Animator Leonard Maltin feels that the visual and technical improvements of the film were lost on the younger crowd, “Sleeping Beauty is a very good film, but more so for older audience than for young children” (156). He also adds that the film is slightly scarier than the previous Disney films as most people consider Maleficent the pinnacle of all Disney villains. While the animation of human characters improved, the storyline is slightly regressive as it nearly replicates the narrative of Snow White. As evidenced by the jealous queen threatening the heroine’s life, the addition of secondary characters, and the heroine falling under a spell of sleep to be awakened by the kiss of true love. However, it is important to appreciate the contributions of Aurora because some of her feminine characteristics are representative of women in society and every Disney heroine is significant in broadening our notions of femininity.

Despite a range of similarities, Sleeping Beauty offers a few new characteristics not representative in Snow White. She, like many women in our society, wants to fall in love with her prince. However, Aurora is more assertive in her interaction with the prince than Snow White. The following is the dialogue between the prince and Aurora in the forest: Prince: But when will I see you again? Aurora: Oh never, never! Prince:

Never? Aurora: Well, maybe someday. Prince: When, tomorrow? Aurora: Oh no, this evening! Prince: Where? Aurora: At the cottage... in the glen. Aurora takes control of her desire and narrates to the prince what time and place they shall meet again. In addition, she stands behind her choice when she tells the fairies she is in love. They are apprehensive of her feelings, but Aurora reassures in her assertion, "Why? After all, I am sixteen." Unbeknownst to the lovers, they are betrothed to one another, but they choose one another despite differences in perceived class. The prince first recognizes Aurora for her voice, a musical extension of her personality, which overrides the fact that she is a peasant living in the woods with three women.

Aurora lives in a maternal society with the three fairies Flora, Fauna, and Merryweather. In addition, Aurora does have both parents but is forced to live in the woods with the three fairies to avoid the curse of Maleficent. This contributes the notion that Aurora is safer with three women who renounced their powers than in the home of her rich and powerful heteronormative parents. *Sleeping Beauty* is one of the only Disney films to depict a positive female peer group for the heroine, and the three fairies provide one of the most stable functioning households of all the Disney films. The four females interact famously together with little competition other than between the fairies who cannot choose if the birthday dress should be pink or blue. Interesting too is the fact that none of the women knows how to cook, clean, or sew and they succeeded for the last 16 years in the woods without magic. This bond between four women is the secret strength needed to save Princess Aurora from the curse of Maleficent.

Critics typically stereotype *Sleeping Beauty* as the epitome of passivity. In the article, "Constructions of the female self", Aurora is said to have "no voice in shaping her



destiny. Aurora is obedient, beautiful, acquiescent to authority, and essentially powerless in matters regarding her own fate” (Henke et.al. 236). Similarly, Peggy Thompson describes her as, “recalling the passivity and superficial attractions of all her predecessors by needing to be rescued finally by a man” (1). Unfortunately, this analysis participates in the further victimization of Aurora by critics. It is no more her fault that she is asleep than a patient in a coma who equally relies on their doctor. She did not choose to fall asleep, it was inflicted upon her against her will and there was little she could do to counter it. Secondly, Aurora is positioned with the utmost importance to the kingdom that shares her fate of slumber. This reinforces Aurora as the central figure and shows that the fate of the kingdom is reliant on her. It is worth noting that neither Aurora nor Prince Philip say anything at all in the second half of the film. In fact, Leonard Maltin felt that as far as the prince is concerned, his horse, Samson “is far more amusing than his stoic master” (155). The impotence of the prince and strength of women is further depicted when he needs the fairies to save him from Maleficent who literally taunts and laughs at him. Rebecca-Anne C. Do Rozario supports this claim in her article, “the elderly fairies are the actual rescuers of the princess, simply working through the prince” (40). He is incapable of saving the princess on his own and must rely on Flora, Fauna, and Merryweather who provide him with weapons of righteousness, shield of virtue and sword of truth. Even still Phillip fails as a savior of Aurora, because as he loses his shield (his virtue) he relies on the fairies to guide his sword for the final blow in a battle against Maleficent. Do Rozario addresses the significance of each heroine’s social bonds as more visibly significant than her familial bonds as means of transmitting power. “Sleeping Beauty’s plot revolves on the enmity between the female fairies with their

powers to bless or curse and on the fate of the princess, to which the kingdom's fate is directly linked." The kingdom would be lost were it not for the strong bonds created between Briar Rose and the three fairies in their makeshift family of women.

#### CHAPTER V: TEAM DISNEY'S FILMS

This second group of Disney films is a collection of narratives about female identity, transformation, and empowerment. After the death of Disney in 1966, the Company did not make another female lead film until 1989. The years in between the last heroine film Sleeping Beauty (1959) and 1989 included primarily live action and animated films centered on animal characters. During these years, Disney failed to have the success they previously had with the heroine lead fairy tale adaptation. One of their greatest losses of this time was an attempt at an original story called, The Black Cauldron (Layng 18). Therefore, in 1989 under the lead of Michael Eisner and Team Disney, they returned to the fairy tale storyline that equated to previous success, this time lead by the heroine Ariel in The Little Mermaid. While Ariel transforms in body, others such as Mulan gain personal growth through introspection, experience, and teaching. Similar to Walt's women who express female desires through song, Team Disney's contribute a growing range of desires and methods for obtaining them. Each of Team Disney's heroines build upon their predecessors to widen the depiction of femininity in Disney film by contributing their unique attributes.

##### *The Little Mermaid (1989)*

The Little Mermaid is an adaptation of the transformation narrative by the Danish folklorist, Hans Christian Andersen. The original tale emerged in the 1800's and appeared consistent with Andersen's themes of being different, often resulting in pain.

Some people felt that the original tale depicted Andersen's struggles to navigate class in his own life, which resulted in difficulties for the author. There are considerable differences between the original tale and the Disney adaptation. For instance, the original mermaid wanted to become human so that she would have an immortal soul, a transition that Andersen depicted as resulting in a quite significant pain that Disney erased. Critics feel this erasure signifies that Disney's Ariel transforms without any sacrifices. Secondly, Andersen's mermaid did not win the heart of her man, which should have resulted in her turning into sea foam. In order to prevent her demise, her sisters traded their hair for a knife that should use to murder her prince in order to save her own life. When she was unable to kill the prince, her good heart saved her from becoming sea foam, instead she becomes a daughter of the air who earns her soul through good deeds. Finally, many of Andersen's original female supporting characters were altered or omitted in the Disney version. The Little Mermaid is the Snow White film for Team Disney because it is a new beginning, a new time, and a new team. The volume of criticism and deconstruction of Disney's The Little Mermaid is unsurpassed by other films in this discussion warranting a larger amount of attention.

The Little Mermaid is challenged by the changing gender roles over the thirty years since Disney's last heroine in Sleeping Beauty. Laura Sells argues in "Where do the Mermaids Stand" that the definitive dual worlds in The Little Mermaid are representative of scenarios women face in today's society. The division between worlds is consistent with the fairytale genre in that one world aligns with reality, and the other with desire and the imaginary. Laura Sells aligns Ariel's access to the human world to women's access to the white male domain. The upper world is the dominant world or the

'real world' and the undersea world is the world of the other. Ariel is literally and figuratively upwardly mobile and she must later choose between voice and access. Whereas some of Ariel's choices trouble Laura Sells, she recognizes the need to emphasize choice and agency in the struggles over the cultural definitions of woman. Sells utilizes Barbara Bush's invocation of the mermaid as a representation of women who do not fit into absolute categories and wish to define themselves. Within this speech, the mermaid challenges the natural order in society, "For over 50 years, it was said that the winner of Wellesley's annual hoop race would be the first to get married. Now they say the winner will be the first to become C.E.O. Both of those stereotypes show too little tolerance for those who want to know where the mermaids stand" (qtd in Sells 175). Using this quote from Barbara Bush highlights the need for women to understand one another and allow multiple possibilities within the spectrum of female representation.

Similar to Mrs. Bush's interpretation of the mermaid as one that does not fit specifically into any world, Ariel disrupts both the upper and lower worlds. Ariel never fits directly into the stereotypical roles of human or mermaid. While other merpeople are content to live in the seemingly fantastical undersea world, Ariel desires more. She merges the realms of both worlds by collecting her keepsakes from the human world. While some critics view this as materialism, it is a representation of her disruption of the merworld. In addition, rather than supporting capitalism, her collection is a treasure trove that reflects her appreciation for the unknown. Her love for a fork dualistically serves to show how one man's garbage is another man's prize. Ariel takes little for granted on her quest for knowledge and a unique identity.

The primary argument for critics is that despite Ariel's rebellion in the narrative, she abandons her dreams for the love of a man. Patrick Murphy writes in his article "The Whole Wide World Was Scrubbed Clean" that Disney films consistently sacrifice the realms of nature and women for the domination of men. He supports this claim by citing Ariel's primary motivation as the pursuit of Eric: "The Little Mermaid replicates the Snow White structure" because of the continuous depiction of women who are thrust into situations which they participate in but cannot save themselves. Thus, he argues that because of their reliance on males to save them, their situation changes not their character. Similarly, Henry Giroux writes: "(A)ll of the Disney female characters are ultimately subordinate to males and define their power and desire almost exclusively in terms of dominant male narrative...Ariel gives away her voice to gain a pair of legs so that she can pursue the handsome prince, Eric" (96). Giroux goes on to theorize that Ariel simply reinforces patriarchy to young female spectators by linking female desire and choice to finding a man. This belief is supported by his statement that, "Disney's Little Mermaid has been granted her wish to be part of the new world of men, but she is still flipping her fins and is not going too far...womanhood offers Ariel the reward of marrying the right man for renouncing her former life under the sea" (96). In an article by Lauren and Alan Dundes, they summarize the film's reliance on men in Freudian terms:

A sexy young girl who wears a shell bra, which reveals more than it conceals is given female genitals by her father so that she can marry a prince who has destroyed her rival mother surrogate by a heroic act of penetration. So the girl enjoys the Electra fantasy of seeing a mother figure eliminated and wedding the man her mother surrogate was about to marry, but at the same time the power of the trident remains the exclusive property of males (128).

However, the Dundes' allocate that Disney does not intentionally add the Freudian concepts, "Disney's choice of plots for cartoon treatment is almost certainly made without awareness of unconscious symbolic elements" (127). Kathi Maio claims that although *The Little Mermaid* provided a comeback for the studio, "looking at the film you'd never know that the women's movement ever happened" (12). Writer Deborah Ross is disappointed that "she gets her legs, she makes her stand, she marches - but only down the aisle, to marry some guy named Eric" (par. 25).

Ariel is not a victim for ending up with Eric. Despite Deborah Ross' negative analysis of *The Little Mermaid*, she resolves that coupling is not the enemy: "I would also argue, however, that just as in life there are marriages and marriages, so in fiction living happily ever after is not always a euphemism for dying. When the marriage seems to grant the heroine true personal fulfillment and possibilities for further growth, the ending may actually seem like the beginning of a new life" (par 26). In spite of the all the criticism, many of the Disney women who choose to pursue men, choose men who are deemed unacceptable by their fathers. This choice functions as a disruption of the father/king's patriarchal rule as the daughter exercises her preference and right to choose. For example, "Ariel and Jasmine, who choose to marry their heroes, do so not simply to obtain husbands, but as an exercise of their regal prerogative, irrevocably changing the status quo by choosing a consort contrary to accepted norms" (Do Rozario 57). Ariel found Eric while pursuing her dreams and she never sacrifices her desire to be a woman upon choosing Eric.

In addition to the perceived need for a man, critics routinely negate all of Ariel's accomplishments because she has a male peer group. Pamela Colby O'Brien supports

this statement when she writes: "Disney's heroine (Ariel) survives to find happiness thanks solely to the heroism and sacrifice of male characters, and without experiencing personal growth or self-empowerment" (173). Henke, Umble, and Smith allow that Ariel is active and defiant; however, in the end, she needed males to save her and she sacrifices curiosity for love (244). It cannot be neglected that the Disney heroines are typically in their teens and are of reasonable age to choose their playmates. Therefore, it is interesting that each chooses primarily male peers. This choice serves a crucial purpose. Whereas previous heroines met their peer group through unexpected circumstances, Ariel had the freedom of choosing her peers. The viewer sees this when she thwarts Triton's authority to go to the surface and meet Scuttle. Her peer choice allows the heroine feminine privilege within the story. Because she chose an all male peer group, her story remains at the forefront, while her peers serve to highlight her tale through interaction. Ariel inhabits the "man's world" without compromising her femininity. The comedic value of the secondary male peer group leads spectators to laugh at the ineptitude of masculinity rather than identify with it thus giving femininity the priority. When the female lead is portrayed as unknowing in a situation it is easily attributed to her lack of experience on her path of transformation. However, since the narrative primarily champions the heroine and the feminine, the peers simply look silly when misinterpreting things, such as when the seagull, Scuttle misinforms Ariel of the uses of a fork and a pipe as well as mistaking Max the dog for a human. Secondly, Ariel is the only one who seems to seek out anything but a complacent life whereas her secondary male companions are comfortable living through Ariel's adventures in her quest to become a human. Critics that presume that Ariel needs the secondary male characters victimize her

negating her choice and presuming she is in need. Disney never confirms a need for the secondary help, but rather these spectators assume it. As evidenced by this film's many of the secondary male characters do a terrible job of leading the heroine. Flounder literally has to jump into Ariel's arms when he is paralyzed by his fear of the shark; Ariel on the other hand confronts the shark face to face. Flounder is also the one who exposes Ariel's trips to the surface, while Sebastian who continuously tries to stop Ariel from having "her head in the clouds" is the one who leaks Ariel's love for Eric to her father, Triton. Despite the ineptitude of the secondary males, Ariel perseveres in her quest for transformation.

King Triton serves as a site for Ariel's rebellion and identity formulation. The Little Mermaid is the first of these Disney films to offer a prominent portrayal of a parent. Whereas, the mother is absent, Ariel's father plays a significant part in Ariel's transformation. Some authors feel that the addition of the father is a fulfillment of a female Oedipus Complex, resulting in what Jung terms an Electra Complex because Ariel develops hatred for the "mother surrogate" Ursula due to feelings toward her father.<sup>5</sup> However, one critic offers a positive spin on Ursula's death, "I prefer to read Ursula's death without regret, for dominant representations of 'woman' must be displaced in order to be replaced, dislocated to be relocated" (Sells 186). Similarly, other critics including Dundes, Trites, and Sells, view King Triton as a reinforcement of patriarchy by depicting the passage of a woman from one man to the next: Ariel is "(I)nitially controlled by her father Triton, the king of the sea, who eventually hands her over to her husband Prince Eric. Never really free, Ariel is allowed only to transfer her allegiance and abode from

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<sup>5</sup> Other Freudian interpretations of this film are discussed in Lauren and Alan Dundes' "The Trident and the Fork, as well as in Roberta Trites' "Disney's Sub'ersion of Andersen's *The Little Mermaid*."



one male to another” (Dundes and Dundes 120). Roberta Trites feels that the passing of Ariel from Triton to Eric depicts a narrative of female dependency and interprets autonomy as gained through finding a man. She writes, “Disney’s The Little Mermaid depicts women as either self effacing or evil, incapable of creating their own responsible power without either depending on men or stealing power from them” (152). Unfortunately, this view of Ariel passing from man to man positions Ariel (and half of society) as a hopeless victim for associating with men. Conversely, this essay argues that as the male parent, Triton does not disrupt the predominance of Ariel’s female narrative. For the most part, if he is a symbol of patriarchal rule, then Ariel regularly subverts hegemony through Triton. Ariel is defined in opposition to King Triton, exhibiting the contrast between old and new, male and female. Ariel appears more understanding, tolerant, and imaginative than her father who initially seems a restrictive, emotional, bigot until he learns from Ariel’s example. Ariel is the Queen of her world, as one author points out, “If the Disney kingdom, and, indeed, fairytales in general, supported the natural privilege of patriarchy, presumably the princess would always have a brother or other male relative poised to succeed her father. But she doesn’t” (Do Rozario 52). “The Disney kingdom may still seem a man’s world, but it is a man’s world dependent on a princess” (Do Rozario 57).

Regardless of some critics who feel that Disney’s heroines show little progression for women, The Little Mermaid’s Ariel is a considerable leap from previous Walt Disney heroines. She may share their resourcefulness and imagination but Ariel, is more active and verbal than Snow White, Cinderella, and Princess Aurora. Numerous critics rave about the progression of Disney’s heroines through the development of Ariel in The

Little Mermaid. Despite her opinion that some things in the Disney world never change, Janet Wasko writes, "Some analysts have argued that the more recent Disney animated films have been updated and modernized, especially as reflected in the new female heroines. Ariel is a sensual, aggressive, mischievous, adventurous, savvy, independent teenager, in contrast to Snow White, who is shy, obedient, hesitant, naïve, innocent, and motherly" (134). Similarly, Peggy Thompson agrees that, "Here is a movie in which the title character first meets her future prince as she rescues him...The hot-headed Ariel is far from passive; she takes tremendous risks in order to enter a new and exiting world... she is always, active, spirited and determined" (1). Jim Keogh recognizes Ariel's progressive actions, "Ariel, the mermaid of the title, was scrappier and more driven than her predecessors. She wasn't waiting around for her prince' she was going after him" (Keogh C2). Janet Maslin pays tribute to Ariel stating that, "Ariel, is even capable of wit, which is more than could ever be said of Snow White or Sleeping Beauty or Cinderella" ("Andersen's 'Mermaid'" C17). Critics tend to give Eric the credit for impaling Ursula and saving the day in *The Little Mermaid*. However, they seem to forget that Eric was rescued a second time before he boards the ship by Ariel who releases herself and Eric from the grips of Ursula and her eels. As Ariel keeps the forces of evil at bay, Eric is able to flee to the ship and drives the mast through Ursula's heart. Not only does Ariel take on sharks, adolescence, and then saves her prince, but she also takes on two eels and a sea witch by the story's end.

Ariel's main goals were fulfilling her desires and formulating identity. Ariel articulates her own desire early in the film through the song, *Part of Your World*. "I want more...Flipping your fins, you don't get too far...Legs are required for jumping,

dancing...What would I give, if I could live, out of these waters...Bright young women, sick of swimming, ready to stand..." Ariel lives out each of her articulated dreams after she trades her voice to the sea witch. Ursula poses Ariel with the tough choice of being with her family or becoming a human, "Life's full of tough choices, isn't it." When Ariel considers her options, she chooses to become human in order to fulfill her dreams. This choice is representative of the difficult options that adolescents face during identity formulation and the struggle for autonomy. Once on land, Ariel has her legs: she runs, jumps, dances and stands. Interestingly, Ariel shows how women can maintain multiple "worlds" in their lives, taking parts of each to form her identity. Even though confined to a three-day period to win Eric's love, Ariel exhibits confidence in her personality when she shows less concern over the kiss than her male companions. For example, Sebastian says, "If you want something done, you got to do it yourself" before initiating his "Kiss the Girl" song. This presents as though he is the one that wants "something done" about Eric kissing Ariel. In fact, on her first day in Eric's castle, Ariel goes to bed while her friends worry about the kiss. Upon receiving her legs Ariel places her new experiences as a human before her concerns with Eric. Ariel provides an example of an assertive heroine who takes action and develops her identity through her choices. She emerges from the water world of her father's mundane merpeople as a vibrant, determined, and autonomous human.

#### *Beauty and the Beast (1991)*

Disney's Beauty and the Beast carries on some of The Little Mermaid's traditions. For example, Belle, the heroine has a prominent father named Maurice, and as Ariel had the hobby of collecting items from the human world, Belle enjoys reading as a

pastime. Disney is responsible for enhancing the centrality of both the father and Belle's hobby. Whereas, The Little Mermaid offers the first prominent father, Beauty and the Beast provides the first overtly supportive parent. This is a Disney added feature because the initial literary version never mentioned the father's name. Conversely, the literary tale names the Beast Adam; whereas, Disney never mentions the Beast's name. The original version of Beauty and the Beast was a lengthy story written by 18<sup>th</sup> Century French novelist and children's' author Jeanne Marie Leprince de Beaumont. Later, Madame Gabrielle –Suzanne Barbot de Villeneuve truncated the narrative into the one most people recognize in writing. Notably, the Disney version of Beauty and the Beast was the first of their animated features to enlist a female writer. Linda Woolverton, the new addition to the writing team, expressed her motivations for Belle: she “modeled Belle on Katharine Hepburn's Jo in the 1933 version of Little Women since both were strong, active women who loved to read and wanted more than life was offering them” (Franke 1D). In Jennifer Stevenson's article, she quotes the intentions of Disney in the development of Belle, “Don Hahn, producer of the film, said his team consciously made the heroine more independent than Ariel” (1D). Perhaps the conscious and expressed efforts of the Disney team accounts for the fact that more critics than ever before agree on Belle's positive female representation.

Whereas most critics agree that Belle shows visible progression for the Disney heroine, they do not agree on her role in the film. Authors such as Susan Jeffords and Henry Giroux argue that the primary narrative of Beauty and the Beast is a story of contrasting masculinities in Beast and in Gaston where Belle serves to “fix” the men. “Belle not only falls in love with the Beast, she ‘civilizes’ him by instructing him on how

to eat properly, control his temper, and dance. Belle becomes a model of etiquette and style as she turns this narcissistic, muscle-bound tyrant into a 'new' man, one who is sensitive, caring, and loving" (100). However, Giroux argues that if you read the text alternatively (as does Jeffords) than you see the film as a struggle between the hypermasculine Gaston and the reforming Beast making Belle a mere prop in their story. "In the end, Belle simply becomes another woman whose life is valued for solving a man's problems" (Giroux 101). Kathi Maio further highlights the problem with Beauty and the Beast's plot, "Disney's reworking of the old fable implies that women are responsible for controlling male anger and violence. If a woman is only pretty and sweet enough, she can transform an abusive man into a prince-forever. But this is a blame the victim scenario waiting to happen. In a realistic sequel, Belle would seek refuge at the village's battered women's shelter" (13). Susan Jeffords delves deeper into the narrative in her article, "The Curse of Masculinity," saying that rather than highlighting Belle's femininity, this film depicts the changing roles of masculinity from the hypermasculine 1980's film hero to the reformed 1990's sensitive male. She argues that Disney's addition of Gaston serves to make the Beast more appealing by contrasting his masculinity with Gaston's hypermasculinity. She asserts that Belle's narrative takes a back seat to the Beast's need for transformation. In essence, Belle "becomes that absent 'some one' who could, and will now, save him from the curse" (168). Whereas these authors assert that Belle is the one who civilizes Beast, Janet Maslin offers an alternative where the Beast is tamed by "household bric-a-brac before he can win Belle's love" (C21). Despite their belief that Beauty and the Beast is a male narrative, both Giroux and Jeffords note that Belle is a progressive character, "Belle is, for all intents and purposes, a

Disney Feminist”; ultimately, showing that while there is contention over the story there is little conflict over the heroine (Jeffords 170).

Contrary to the reading of Beauty and the Beast as a male narrative Sharon Downy views it as one of feminine empowerment. Similar to Belinda Stott’s reading of Cinderella, Sharon Downy champions the establishment of a pleasurable “female glance.” Although Belle shares the title with the Beast, Downy supports that Belle’s is the predominant story. “Although the story is presented from a male’s perspective, it also enunciates the experiences of Belle, without whom the tale could not be told. Moreover, Belle’s actions-not her beauty-drive the film’s tension, inform other characters’ behaviors, and resolve the film’s conflict” (Downy 190-1). Downy’s claim that Belle’s story is the focus of Beauty and the Beast is supported with the cited fact, “Belle occupies double the screen time of any other character in the film” (Henke et al. 238). Sharon Downy adds that Belle uses music “to offer a portrait of a strong, relationally-connected woman acting to secure self-validation and her own freedom” (195). Downy exhibits that music along with exaggerated animation are used as instruments to highlight Belle’s wants and to satire the townspeople, especially the males. She also notes that Belle uses her reading as a symbol of her autonomy, which contrasts the “provincial” townspeople. The townspeople ostracize Belle for her reading; however, her reading positions her as superior to others. Her superiority secures her as the chosen one, which is why the Beast and Gaston both need her. Ultimately, Downey summarizes the narrative of Beauty and the Beast as granting power to female legitimacy by “placing a woman’s needs for independence and validation ahead of any relationship needs” (208). Similar to Downey, Deborah Ross views an empowering narrative for females through the relationship

between Belle and the Beast, "The Beast cannot become a handsome prince until the heroine actively wants him, truly chooses him for reasons of her own" (par 28). Belle never presents as marriage minded and allows the mutual friendship to grow over animated seasons, her final choice of the Beast, "confirms the value of a woman's equal right to a will of her own" (par 31). Belle seeks adventure and eventually finds it in the Beast's castle where she quickly adjusts and masters a new realm. The Beast's castle is definitively an enchanted world in comparison to the provincial town. Despite being locked in the castle, Belle never appears fearful and she stands her ground with the Beast.

Belle never misses an opportunity for adventure. In Belle's opening song, she names her desire for adventure, "I want much more than this provincial life. I want adventure in the great wide somewhere. I want it more than I can tell. For once it might be grand, to have someone understand. I want so much more than they've got planned." Deborah Ross recognizes the ability of the fantasy realm to provide liberation for Belle in Beauty and the Beast, "Nor is she content just to read about adventure in the great wide somewhere. Given the chance to tour the Beast's library-ordinarily for Belle the greatest of temptations-she chooses instead to explore the forbidden west wing of his castle, as if somehow aware that she will find there the escape from provincial life she has been longing and singing for" (par 30). Some authors such as Sharon Downy see Belle's rejecting the tour of the library as a silencing of her autonomy, "Her promise to remain forever at the castle requires forfeiture of her books and her father, twin symbols of affirmation, freedom, and intellect. This sacrifice silences Belle" (95). However, it seems more reasonable to read this as Ross does, where Belle chooses to live the adventure rather than read about it. In addition, through the completion of her adventure

Belle is rewarded by a whole library of books by the end of the narrative. Had Belle relinquished her drive for adventure she could only read other people's stories while she remained captive in the Beast's castle never knowing of what lay within.

Belle remains fearless in the face of danger. This claim is supported by a dual depiction of Belle as protector and Belle as assertive woman. While her father Maurice is able bodied and intelligent, Belle is the protector of the family. Early in the story, Maurice ventures through the woods and is captured by the Beast. Upon realizing something is wrong, Belle immediately rushes to his aid and takes her father's place in the Beast's castle. She saves his life a second time, later in the film when she realizes by peering into the magic mirror, that her father is ill and lost in the woods. Not only does Belle physically save her father again, she protects his name from the townspeople who hope to lock Maurice up for being "insane". One article laments, "Unlike her counterparts in Cinderella and Sleeping Beauty, Belle is no damsel in distress. Neither is she a helpless witness to the film's action nor removed from it" (Henke et al. 238). Belle is a pillar of self-confidence when facing the Beast and Gaston, both of whom take the long-standing place of Disney's evil witch as the villain. Belle thwarts the advances and marriage proposals of Gaston and dictates her terms with the Beast. "No victim, Belle sets the terms for the bargains she makes. In this sense, she exercises more power on her own behalf than previous Disney heroines" (Henke et al. 239). Supportive of the previous quote are the words of Jim Keogh: "This being a Disney movie, Belle was more than a bookworm. She stood up to the fearsome Beast, who imprisoned her in his castle. In her darkest hours, Belle pulled on resources to survive in what appeared to be a hopeless situation" (C2). Whereas the Disney women before her made assertions, Belle



makes more of them and she does so with an undeniable confidence. She never conforms to society's standards, and because of her self-esteem, she is rewarded with knowledge and adventure.

*Pocahontas* (1995)

Pocahontas continues to build on the traditions of The Little Mermaid and Beauty and the Beast. First, Pocahontas continues Beauty and the Beast's discarding of the evil witch. A noteworthy point is that beginning with Beauty and the Beast and throughout the remainder of the heroine-led films, that a number of men replace the evil villainess. One of the reasons this is interesting is that it allows the audience to presume that it takes multiple men to take the place of a powerful woman. In Beauty and the Beast, rather than a femme fatale, we see multiple nemeses in Beast, Gaston, the townspeople, and the asylum keeper. In Pocahontas, her replacement is a slew of invading English explorers; similarly, in Mulan and Lilo & Stitch, numbers of men are needed to replace single evil women. Secondly, as Ariel does in The Little Mermaid, Pocahontas rebels against her father and in doing so saves the life of her love interest. Whereas, Ariel saves Eric from drowning, Pocahontas saves John Smith from execution at the hands of her father, Chief Powhatan. Similarly, as in the first two installments featuring Team Disney's heroines, Pocahontas rejects the traditionally idealized love interest. King Triton wanted Ariel to marry a merman, Belle rejects good old boy Gaston, and Pocahontas refuses the Indian warrior, Kocoum. Finally, as Snow White does with the seven dwarfs, and Cinderella with her mice, Pocahontas serves as a unique source of education for others in the film.

Pocahontas adds a number of firsts to the Disney heroine. Pocahontas is the first of these films to break away from the fairy tale adaptation. This film is a loosely based portrayal of historical events surrounding the settling of Jamestown, Virginia in the 1600's. The Disney depiction of American history has led to a range of critiques surrounding the numerous inaccuracies. Although the story of Pocahontas is a contested one, because it has been passed on through white male literature, critics seem to agree that the Disney version significantly alters history. Kathi Maio fears that children will mistake the Disney version for a history lesson that eliminates the genocide of the Indians by the English and adds a love relationship between Pocahontas and John. Maio writes that Pocahontas actually called John 'father' at times, suggesting a different type of relationship than Disney projects (14). Disney also ages Pocahontas, adds the best friend Nakoma, and exaggerates the relationship with Kocoum of whose very existence in her life historians are unsure. Another first for Disney's leading heroines is that Pocahontas is not the traditional Caucasian leading woman. Henry Giroux briefly discusses Pocahontas' race saying, "Pocahontas appears to both challenge and reproduce some of these stereotypes. She is a far cry from the traditional negative stereotypes of Native Americans portrayed in Hollywood films" (101). However, Giroux feels that the Disney version tells Pocahontas' story only through her relationship with men, stating "Her coming of age identity crisis is largely defined by her love affair with John Smith. (Her) struggle is drawn primarily through her struggle to save John from being executed by her father" all of which contributes to the erasures of a history, told through a white Americanized perspective<sup>6</sup> (101). In reality, Pocahontas was a Native American

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<sup>6</sup> For more discussion on Pocahontas and race, see Kiyomi Kutsuzawa's "Disney's *Pocahontas*:"

Powhatan daughter of a chief whose real name was Matoaka, Pocahontas was a nickname meaning “little mischief”. Disney started to add narratives of race in their supplementary women beginning with Aladdin’s Jasmine in 1992. While Pocahontas is the first leading woman of color, Disney continued to build on this concept with Mulan and Lilo & Stitch. Pocahontas is also the first heroine to have a mother (and grandmother) as a part of the narrative. In Sleeping Beauty, the audience knew that Princess Aurora had a mother; however, her character was inconsequential to Aurora’s story. Throughout Pocahontas, the mother is not visible but her story is present from beginning to end through conversation and the fact that Pocahontas wears her necklace. Similarly, rather than a surrogate character, Pocahontas regularly visits Grandma Willow for maternal advice. Finally, Pocahontas is the first of the Disney heroines to verbally reject the typical ending of a “happily ever after” romantic pairing. Some critics argue she is the first heroine who does not marry; however, neither Alice, nor the later Lilo ever marry nor develop a love interest. Similarly, Cinderella is the only film to show an actual wedding at the film’s end. The other films end with a pairing without ever showing a wedding; therefore, critics only assumed that “happily ever after” equated to marriage.

In spite of her final rejection of John Smith, Pocahontas yields criticism for her choices. While some critics feel that Disney feared to tread on interracial coupling, others consider her choice to stay with her tribe as a stereotypical representation of gender. Lauren Dundes argues in her article about “Disney’s modern heroine” that the

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Reproduction of Gender, Orientalism, and the Strategic Construction of Racial Harmony in the Disney Empire.” Asian Journal of Women’s Studies, Seoul: 6.4 (31 December 2000): 39. Other discussion of race for Pocahontas and Mulan are in Henry Giroux’s, The Mouse That Roared and Annalee Ward’s Mouse Morality, The Rhetoric of Disney Animated Films. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2002.

goal of Pocahontas' actions amount to a love for John Smith, which "reinforces gender stereotypes wherein a heroine makes decisions based on her relationships" (354). Dundes asserts that Pocahontas subverts her desires to be with John for altruism, which promotes "nurturance as a woman's primary goal (which) can lead to dependence on others for approval and self-esteem" (354). Lauren also feels that Pocahontas is a step backward from The Little Mermaid because Ariel pursues the goal of self-fulfillment, which included Eric. Pocahontas does not fulfill herself in the same way because she stays home, while Ariel pursued a new world in spite of the potential loss of family. "Ariel binds herself to a man she loves and admires while fulfilling her dreams in a new world; Pocahontas is bound to serve a community that does not share her interest in and tolerance for outsiders- after first enjoying an exciting period of adventure and romance which is abruptly curtailed" (358). Dundes calls this altruism preparation for the maternal role of subverting desires for the children, thus demonstrating the ability to nurture as the "supreme female virtue" (359). She alludes that Pocahontas had to make a choice in order to reinforce that women cannot have it all. "By staying with the people, Pocahontas avoids role confusion and role discontinuity, so troubling for American girls who are torn by the desire to be exemplary mothers and successful in their careers" (361). Alternatively, other critics interpret the ending of Pocahontas as an assertion of her autonomy. Authors Henke, Umble, and Smith write that Pocahontas affirms herself by making her own choices. In their words:

Love takes second seat to a larger story about a young woman in pursuit of a dream. The love of a man is neither necessary nor sufficient for the accomplishment of her goal. Pocahontas' happiness, then, is not determined by whom she marries, but by her own discovery of selfhood" (242). Her "choices reflect a sense of selfhood that is a bold stroke for a Disney heroine. A feminist

psychological reading might see in her decision to embrace her cultural roots as an alternative to Disney's typical heterosexual narratives in which the 'perfect girl's' destiny is a monogamous relationship with a white man (240).

In spite of the controversy over the ending, Lauren Dundes, who felt Pocahontas' refusal to leave her people was a stereotypical feminine representation, writes, "Pocahontas indeed breaks the mold for Disney heroines, providing a role model sharply divergent from the submissive Snow White of 1935 who concerns herself with domestic duties and later waits passively to be rescued" (354). Dundes' assessment seems to promote Pocahontas as active by contrasting her to Snow White; however, in doing so it negates the accomplishments of Snow White. Pocahontas is comparable to Snow White because she is resourceful and articulates her desires. The difference is Pocahontas desired to stay behind and lead her people rather than follow Snow White's desire to be with the man she loved. Rather than judging their status in relationship to a man, both women should be appreciated equally for the action of responsible choice, despite the outcome.

Pocahontas frequently invokes the path of life and the importance of choice. The symbol of the river, the arrow in her dreams, and John's compass reiterate the course of life. Early in the film Pocahontas sings, "What I love most about rivers is you can't step in the same river twice. The water's always changing, always flowing, but people, I guess, can't live like that. We all must pay a price, to be safe we lose our chance of ever knowing what's around the river bend." While her father encourages her to choose the safe and reliable path, Grandma Willow teaches Pocahontas that sometimes the right path is not always the easiest one, and any action can cause a ripple effect. Not only does the film reinforce the importance of choice and taking chances, but it offers solutions in conflict resolution. Pocahontas emphasizes thinking and talking as alternatives to

violence. Because of her choices, Pocahontas earns the praise of critics considering representations of gender in the Disney heroine. Caryn James considered Pocahontas the most subversive heroine to date, "She is more active than Ariel...She is even stronger than the fiercely intelligent Belle...her behavior makes her as powerful as any traditional male hero" (H13). Lizzie Franke offers a more definitive praise calling Pocahontas the feistiest, most emancipated Disney heroine yet, "(She) is the sturdy sort who can navigate a forest on her own, who is full of wisdom, courage and other honourable virtues and, most of all, doesn't have a home-making manual in sight. Poor old Snow White must be rotating gracefully in her glass coffin" (9). Similarly, Nicole Arthur champions Pocahontas in contrast to Snow White, "(Pocahontas) demonstrates her physical prowess by diving off a cliff hundreds of feet above the water and then canoeing over a treacherous mountain waterfall...Snow White couldn't even run through the woods without tripping (GO1). Whereas, these critics do not value that previous heroines are rooted in a specific time in history that inhibits generational comparisons, nor do they recognize the contributions of the early heroines, they certainly recognize the progression of the Disney heroine.

#### *Mulan* (1998)

Critics often compare the recent heroines of Team Disney to those of Walt Disney. However, Duane Dudek quotes Disney animator Leonard Maltin saying, "comparing Mulan with earlier animated Disney heroines is like comparing 'apples and mushrooms'" (1). Due to Mulan's type and level of activity Duane Dudek feels that Mulan is more comparable to "the courage, ingenuity and selflessness that are associated with Disney's male heroes" (1). Although there are differences between the heroines,

Disney makes sure none of its women are forgotten or left behind in *Mulan*, Mushu pays tribute to an earlier heroine when he tries to wake Mulan for her training, “All right! Rise and shine, Sleeping Beauty!” The next film, *Lilo & Stitch* also pays tribute to heroines that preceded it, which we will see later. Whereas, critics use the earlier heroines to contrast with the new heroines, this thesis views it as a continuum of growth. The fact that Disney pays homage to earlier heroines keeps their presence known as a foundation for the new heroines.

Disney’s version of *Mulan* credits a story by Robert d. San Souci, about the Chinese legend of Hua Mulan (Fa Mulan) from the first century. Legend has it that Hua Mulan went to war in the Chinese Imperial Army in place of her elderly father. Since there were no male successors to go in his place, and the army forbade women, Hua Mulan disguised herself as a man to fight in the war and proved herself a hero. In the Disney version, Mulan’s gender is revealed when she is injured in battle and needs medical attention, which strays from the legend where Hua Mulan arrived safely at home after the war before her gender was recognized. Similar to *Pocahontas*, Disney adapted the story of a historical woman for *Mulan*. Both tales include significant women who provide an empowering female narrative for Disney women. Disney’s diversion from the fairy tale narrative tends to increase criticism from authors and critics who fear audiences will accept the films as archival depictions of race and history. Although Disney’s main goal is to entertain rather than educate, Kathi Maio criticizes Disney’s *Mulan* for its historical inaccuracies. “The distortion level in Disney’s *Mulan* equals that of *Pocahontas*” (14). Maio argues that Mulan’s love interest in hunky Shang is inaccurate and supports the idea that women need a man to be happy. She even goes so far as to call

Mulan, Snow White with a darker skin color because, “Even though Mulan is a brave, strong hero, her motivation for entering the army has nothing to do with her own ambitions and everything to do with serving patriarchy. Disney makes it clear that men still command Mulan and they always retain the power of life and death over her. But not to worry, all they really want to do is marry her and turn her into a Disney happy homemaker” (14).

Conversely, Raina Lipsitz feels strongly that, “for the first time in Disney movie history, (there is) unabashedly feminist tones” because the plot supersedes the romance story for once with, “no love song, no climactic kiss and certainly no mooning over boys” (4N). The studio admits they dismissed their attempts to turn Mulan into a traditional romance as in previous films because it diminished her character, “The woman warrior simply defied Disney stereotype” (Dudek 1). It is also worth mentioning that in spite of the pairing, Mulan maintains her sense of self. She takes matters into her own hands as the first Disney woman to ask a man out. Shang was too flabbergasted to ask Mulan out, without hesitation, she asks him to dinner. Her articulations reaffirm that the pairing is of mutual consent. It doubly serves to show viewers the appeal of non-traditional women.

In addition to his objections to the coupling of Mulan and Shang, Henry Giroux is troubled by her participation in the war, “Rather than aligning herself against the patriarchal celebration of war, violence, and militarism, Mulan becomes a cross dresser who proves that when it comes to war she can perform as well as any male. By embracing a masculine view of war, Mulan cancels out any rupturing of traditional gender roles” (102). Contrarily, Ron Givens views Mulan as “a young Chinese heroine who rejects her culture’s traditional female roles of submissive wife and mother and



triumphs in the man's world of the armed forces. The conclusion of Mulan offers a woman who has exploded the gender restrictions of her society, defined herself on her own terms and found a man who loves her for who she is. How strange that now, with the renewed debate over women 'having it all,' Disney has delivered just such a heroine" (7). Mulan never embraces the war itself, she engages in battle first to save her father, and then throughout she must save herself from being discovered or killed. Rather than embracing patriarchy and becoming a "loyal subject" of the army, Mulan subverts male authority by going against Shang's orders when she shoots the cannon at the mountain, when she devises a plan to save the Emperor, and when she turns down the job as Emperor's counsel. The army simply provided an agent for change in Mulan by creating the distance she needed from traditional society. Staying at home would crush her capacity to be herself because of societal and familial pressures, in the army allowed her to be herself and she took it home with her.

Disney battles stereotypical gender roles with music in Mulan. Contrary to what critics Maio and Giroux argue, Disney defies traditional ideals of women with Mulan through song. Early in the film, the song "Honor to us all" articulates the traditional role of women, which is countered by Mulan's song "Reflection". In "Honor to us all", the town sings as Mulan prepares to meet the matchmaker, "Men want girls with good taste, calm, obedient, who work fast-paced, with good breeding, and a tiny waist. You'll bring honor to us all. We all must serve our Emperor, who guards us from the Huns, a man by bearing arms, a girl by bearing sons." Mulan also visually challenges the traditional women in the town as evidenced by the comment that turning Mulan into an honorable woman requires, turning "a sow's ear into a silk purse". Mulan is so

detached from what a woman “should be” that she records the “feminine virtues” on her arm before trying to recite them to the matchmaker. Although she fears disgracing her family, Mulan articulates her difference from other women in the introspective song “Reflection”, “Look at me; I will never pass for a perfect bride or a perfect daughter. Can it be I'm not meant to play this part?” Lea Salonga, the singing voice of Mulan, interprets the film's moral, “you don't have to be what society tells you to be or what your mother tells you to be but that you can be what you feel inside” (Dudek 1). Director Tony Bancroft confirms her assessment, “Mulan doesn't want to change herself, she wants to be herself consistently throughout the film, all the other characters end up changing their view of what she should be” (Dudek 1). Mulan recognizes that she is different from the conventional women that surround her and she uses it to her advantage.

Mulan is an important addition to the Disney heroines because of her unique femininity. Whereas, Ariel and Belle articulate dissatisfaction with “provincial life”, Mulan is the first heroine to voice her discomfort with the “traditional” feminine role. Secondly, she offers the first visual image of a woman without a dress. Finally, she is the first Disney heroine to engage in battle. Through her actions and words, Mulan depicts the fluidity of gender and empowers women. Mulan sticks up for the tomboy in some of us when she shows that just because she isn't the “typical woman” doesn't mean she is a man. She is able to surpass the abilities of the best men in Army training, but she maintains her sense of self as she tells Mushu, “Just because I look like a man doesn't mean I have to smell like one.” When Mulan goes to war as Ping Fa Zhou she shatters stereotypes of what men's and women's roles are. She exemplifies her strength by reaching the arrow atop the pole and by defeating Shang in training camp. Similarly, she

is able to command an army and make split second decisions as seen in the final scenes. Mulan takes control and risks her life when she shoots the cannon at the mountaintop to bury the Huns in a mound of snow. Later, Mulan saves the Emperor of China by devising a plan to infiltrate the palace by disguising the men as concubines. Raina Lipsitz recognizes the doubly powerful message of Mulan defeating the Huns dressed as the traditionally submissive concubine. This image affirms that Mulan can conquer adversity in any gender role. The Emperor's comments near the end of the film suggest that Mulan's distinct femininity is what makes her significant "I've heard a great deal about you, Fa Mulan. You stole your father's armor, ran away from home, impersonated a soldier, deceived your commanding officer, dishonored the Chinese Army, destroyed my palace, and...you have saved us all...The flower that blooms in adversity is the most rare and beautiful of all...You don't meet a girl like that every dynasty." At the film's end, Mulan challenged people's beliefs and was embraced by Chinese society for her self, a person she discovered and developed on her own.

Along with her Disney firsts, Mulan builds on previous heroines' contributions. In the practice of Team Disney women, Mulan has a visible father however; she also has a mother and a grandmother. Mulan's relationship with her family greatly influences her life choices. Aside from her father's initial cultural beliefs about the woman's position, her entire family is supportive of her, which is something that we first saw with Belle's father. Similarly, she builds on the endurance and resourcefulness of Walt's women and takes it to new heights. She builds on Snow White's ability to think quickly and rely on her strengths. Similar to all her predecessors Mulan has dreams. Whereas other women dreamed of love, freedom, and change, Mulan desires to be accepted for who she is.

which is “different”. This teaches younger viewers that it is okay to be different as long as you are true to yourself. Mulan cares for her father as much as Cinderella did; however, hers is still alive. Like the women before her, she relied on her instincts to endure hardships and she develops her identity through adventure, but she does it with increased intensity. Mulan is introspective, and caring, as well as powerful and intelligent. Mulan contributes to the rich heritage of Disney women who have a knack for using their heads to overcome obstacles and change their circumstances.

#### *Lilo & Stitch (2002)*

The final installment of Disney animated women in film is Lilo from Lilo & Stitch. Although, like Belle, she shares the title with a partner, the narrative would be lifeless without Lilo. Lilo is the first of the Disney women to inhabit a completely original narrative. Because of its more recent release, there is very little scholarly coverage of this film. Released June 16, 2002 Lilo & Stitch is the 41<sup>st</sup> Disney animated feature. In this original tale, Lilo introduces a new type of family. Both of her parents died in a car crash and she lives with her sister in the poor section of Hawaii. The fracturing of her family leaves Lilo emotionally scarred as evidenced by her request for “someone who won't leave.” Lilo’s older sister Nani, cares for her while struggling to maintain job and home under the watchful eye of social worker Cobra Bubbles.

Even though she recognizes that she is from a broken family, Lilo maintains a strong mind, conviction, and imagination. Much like other Team Disney women, Lilo engages in a number of activities such as photography, listening to Elvis, reading, dancing, and surfing. Whereas Alice created a world with her imagination, Lilo uses hers to deal with the world she lives in. Lilo’s imagination is prevalent throughout the

narrative. When Snow White relied on her domestic capabilities to keep her safe, Lilo relies on her imagination and humor to guide her through hard times. Similar to Snow White and Cinderella who were cast out, Lilo is an outcast. Like her predecessors, Lilo maintains a positive attitude despite her position on the fringe and her personality has an impact on others. Even though she occasionally bites people and makes voodoo dolls Lilo represents a piece of everyone who has ever felt slightly left out. Her quirkiness and appreciation for the unconventional adds to her personality. Lilo has a love for photographing different types of people whom she relishes as unusually beautiful. Similarly, it is her acceptance of things “alien” that allows her friendship with Stitch. The two build a mutual loving relationship through understanding as evidenced by Lilo’s invitation of Stitch to her family. After disclosing her hardships and sharing with Stitch, Lilo says, “What happened to yours (family)? I hear you crying at night. Are you thinking about them? I know that's why you wreck things, and push me.” Despite her hardships, Lilo extends a welcome to Stitch, whom everyone dismissed as a destructive waste of time. “Our family's little now, and we don't have many toys... But if you want, you could be a part of it. You could be our baby, and we'd raise you to be good.” Even though her personality and fondness for feeding peanut butter and jelly to her fish alienates her, she never compromises her self for the friendship of others. Her relationship with Stitch completely removes the traditional love story and replaces it with a different type of love. Lilo exhibits her imagination and individuality when she displays her self-made doll Scrump to the local girls, “I made her. Her head is too big, so I pretend that a bug laid eggs in her ear, and she is sad because she has only a few more days to...” Lilo also exhibits more personality than previous Disney women do. Her

humor emanates as she discusses the terms of agreement for fighting with her sister, “Nani: I’ll tell you what. Promise me you won’t fight, and I promise not to scream at you, except on special occasions. Lilo: Tuesdays and bank holidays would be nice.” Lilo is the avant-garde Disney heroine who avenges the sharp-tongued, impulsive, quirky little girl in some of Lilo & Stitch’s viewers.

Lilo is a continuation of Disney’s growing range of women in terms of age, body, and culture. Lilo & Stitch foregrounds the Hawaiian culture through the adaptation of the word “Ohana”, as well as through music, dance, and symbols. The article, “Kids’ Film Praised For Realistic Female Forms” references Kathleen Kellner who touts, “Animators who worked on the movie say they were explicitly directed to make the character’s bodies fleshier than the standard Barbie-shaped animated female form” (9). Lilo comes full circle in the face of Barbie-esque criticism of Disney women by returning to the fuller figure and age appropriate characteristics of Snow White. Similarly, while the audience knew that the families of Walt’s women were fragmented, Lilo brings the issue to the forefront. One-half of the two-director team of Lilo and Stitch, Dean DeBlois expounds on this idea, “it’s not a stretch to note that the central theme of Lilo & Stitch is the formation of a nontraditional family. We hope that what everybody takes away from it is that a family is what you make it, not necessarily what you’re born into” (Steele 53). This new type of family in Lilo & Stitch even plays on images of the traditional family in popular culture at the end of the film. During the credits, there are a number of photographs of Lilo and her family recreating well-known images of Norman Rockwell.

In addition to paying homage to various forms of popular culture, Lilo & Stitch recognizes the Disney family heritage. While many viewers might recognize references

to Star Wars, Star Trek, and Men In Black, fewer might notice Lilo & Stitch's honoring of the Disney family. Lilo always appreciates the significance of each family member's contributions, "Ohana means family. Family means no one gets left behind. But, if you want to leave, you can. I'll remember you though. I remember everyone that leaves." There are two references to Mulan in the film. Not only does Nani have a poster of Mulan but also one of the jobs she held was at the Mulan Wok. The poster of Mulan on Nani's wall positions Mulan as one of two things, a family photograph of someone who Nani does not want to leave behind, or secondly, a teen idol photograph of someone Nani idolizes. Similarly, we see a tribute to Dumbo, which was the last film before Lilo & Stitch to use watercolor backgrounds, where Lilo has a stuffed Dumbo in her room. Similarly, Lilo's library in her room is reminiscent of those that Belle encountered throughout her journeys. Finally, the movie poster for Lilo & Stitch, which depicts numerous Disney, animated icons and offers the phrase, "There's one in every family", which reinforces a Disney family that never forgets its members.

#### CHAPTER VI: DISNEY'S FEMININE LEGACY

This essay takes a polemical approach to the volumes of critics who devalue the continuum of feminine attributes offered through Disney's heroines. By countering critics and promoting a gaze that champions female empowerment, this paper suggests a new way to view Disney films for children, parents, educators, and authors. Disney does not provide images of women as stereotypical and passive, but rather, critics impose these values upon the heroines with penchant for seeking out female victimization. By stereotyping certain images of women as wholly passive, critics fail to recognize the range of femininity in Disney film and ultimately re-victimize the heroine with their

binding assessments of ideal women. This essay argues that the Disney heroines are not passive and that they actively progress through time in a manner that mirrors society.

The Disney Company offers a broad array of feminine representations. Each heroine contributes unique attributes that audience members identify with and make their own. Similarly, each generation of Disney women contributes to the progression of women who follow. Much like the women of our own families who exhibit a range of feminine attributes that add to our own identities, the heroines of Disney's animated films develop from their predecessors, beginning with the enduring and imaginative women of Walt Disney. The women of Walt Disney reflect many of our grandmothers and mothers who are assertive and tell great stories, and taught us lessons, but they don't want to cliff dive. They did fall in love and they kept a clean house while making a mean batch of home made mashed potatoes. As we appreciate and take pride in these women who came before us, so should we recognize the accomplishment of Disney's early heroines. Snow White represents the resourcefulness of the Great Depression women. Cinderella overcomes obstacles and achieves the American Dream of the World War II era. Sleeping Beauty's Aurora offers a realm of fulfilling desires and female friendships that were important to women in the fifties. Alice acted on her impulses and illuminated the infinite capacity of the female mind. Similar to the women of the sixties she suffered conservative backlash at first for being ahead of her time, but she trudged onward to be the first Disney film released on television.

Team Disney's women exhibit a progression that builds on the actions and assertiveness of early heroines. Women's position in society has changed since Snow White in 1938 and Team Disney reflects that in their heroines. The women who came



before them fostered their transformation into overtly individual, non-traditional heroines by providing a foundation. This generation is the women of the sixties and today who have increased access to worlds previously denied, which is reflected in Ariel's access and control of multiple worlds. Ariel rebels against her father and stands up for her beliefs in the way a young peacenik would protest to end the Vietnam War in spite of the fact that her father is an Army Colonel. Belle represents a passion for reading and a flare for teaching, which women who gained access to higher education and employment can appreciate. Representative of increased access and public support for women's sports, Pocahontas brought athleticism, action, and enjoyment to a new level for women with her navigation skills and agility. She also emphasized the importance of family in a woman's life, a tradition that Mulan follows. Mulan represented a new breed of introspective woman who gains access to and dominates the "man's world" while still maintaining her unique femininity in the face of a conservative environment. Finally, in an era of films like Mean Girls, Lilo shows love for the unconventional girls of society by championing her non-traditional attributes. Disney's heroines have grown along with women in society as proven by the continuum of female attributes represented in Disney animated film.

Femininity is a subjective term that allows the individual to interpret its meaning. Whereas no specific heroine may be representative of yourself or the women around you, the Disney canon provides a range of characteristics for the spectator to indulge. For example, my definition of femininity pulls from Snow White and Cinderella's ability to overcome obstacles while maintaining an eye on the prize, from Alice's curiosity, Ariel's rebellion, Pocahontas' sense of family and rejection of

marriage, Mulan's embracing of "male" mannerisms and garb, and Lilo's embracing the unconventional, her witty humor, and her alienation. Each heroine comes from an array of backgrounds and situations that the viewer can identify with. Disney offers distinct familial backgrounds and friendships both good and bad, as well as choices we make on the path to identity formulation and goal attainment.

Disney expands the boundaries of femininity through its heroines by embracing a range of female attributes. Almost no woman is left out: whether she wears a dress or pants, sweeps or swims, endures or adventures, is charming or assertive, or cute or quirky, she is visible in Disney animated film. Each woman in society had the right to be the "happy homemaker" or the warrior, but no one can tell them which to be or how to do it. Every Saturday I sit down with my mother and my grandmother and we endlessly debate our personal and generational differences and similarities over dinner. Yet, we compliment one another and help each other grow. I learned the fundamentals of my personality from their examples and made them my own. Similar to the way I appreciate their contributions to my family, society cannot deny the offerings of the heroines in the Disney genealogy. This is the Disney family of women and like our own families none will be forgotten. It may be slightly little, some argue broken, but definitely good... "Yeah, still good".

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## VITA

Gwendolyn Hofmann was born in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania on October 20, 1977 to Nancy and John Hofmann. Raised in Catasauqua, PA she is the younger sibling to John Hofmann Jr. In May of 1999, she received a Bachelor of Arts from Moravian College, majoring in Psychology and with a double minor in Sociology and Women's Studies. The years following, she moved to Whitehall, PA and worked in the mental health field until a series of events and a love for popular culture led her to Lehigh University in the fall of 2004 in the pursuit of a Master of Arts in American Studies.

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